

## Fractures

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## Fractures

by [Buck\\_in\\_Glasses \(GalahadsGurl\)](#)

### Summary

The zygomatic bones can be found on the upper and lateral portions of the face.

Among all facial damage, the zygomatic is the second most injury-prone bone. Young males are the most common victims of this type of fracture injury. This could be due to the fact that they are also the ones who are typically involved with trouble that leads to injury to the face.

Trauma to the zygomatic arch can be caused by vehicular accidents, contact sports and, sometimes, assault.

Such as a punch to the face.

### Notes

Hello everyone! This starts at the end of 5x04, after Chimney and Buck's altercation and proceeds for a week following. Please note that Maddie's call to Buck at the end of 5x05 has not happened! I hope you enjoy this!

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

## Fractures



Voicemail 1: October 12th, 2021 @ 6:30am PT

*The first voicemail Howard Han received after he took Jee-Yun and left Los Angeles in search of his vulnerable girlfriend came just as he hit city limits. He listened just long enough to hear Buck's sobbing plea of, "I'm sorry, Chim, please," before deleting it and tossing the phone onto the passenger seat. He didn't think about it again.*

Buck's eyes **burned** and his head pounded as though a dwarf kept taking his sledgehammer to the place where Chimney had punched him the night before. Eddie had spent the night running concussion checks and applying as much ice as Buck's skin could handle. Not that Buck could feel much through the numbness in his jaw and face. Honestly, Buck figured the lack of feeling was because of the ice and made an effort not to complain.

He and Eddie had come a long way since Eddie called him exhausting, but Eddie had spent the entire evening with him and he had a son to raise. Buck could manage just fine on his own.

Tossing back four Tylenol and washing them down with a swig of water through a straw, Buck crawled into bed and closed his eyes. He just needed a nap - he'd be fine for shift later that day. He just needed to sleep.

Between one breath and the next, Buck passed out and knew nothing more.

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Vocicemail 2: October 13th, 2021 @ 12:14 pm PT

*The next call from Buck came just as Chim arrived in San Francisco. He could see the Golden Gate Bridge as he reached for the phone, grunting at the sight of his picture and swiping to ignore the call. He had absolutely zero interest in even looking at Maddie's brother's face, never mind actually having to talk to him. When the phone dinged to indicate another voicemail, Chimney frowned and forced himself to listen to it.*

*Buck sounded drunk, slurring his words and hacking wetly as he begged Chim to forgive him; begged Chim to understand that he respected Chimney, but Maddie was his sister.*

*Chim didn't even bother to listen to the rest. He deleted the voicemail, same as the first, and then sent a text to Bobby warning their captain Buck was drunk before shift. That should keep Buck out of his hair for a while.*

The worst part of Buck's near constant battle with pain wasn't even the almost debilitating headache Buck had been dealing with since that night. In fact, his headache really had nothing on the pain in his face and jaw, the bone feeling as though it had been replaced by a hot poker. He couldn't even open his mouth - the first time he tried, he nearly screamed through tightly clenched lips.

Which said nothing of the first glob of congealed black blood Buck spit into his hand the morning after. Buck had been tasting blood in the back of his throat since the punch, but he had Eddie check. Despite the agony of opening his jaw that wide, no wound existed in the soft tissues of his mouth and it seemed to be coming from some damage inside of his sinuses. Blowing his nose made Buck's vision spot, so he tried not to do that very often, instead letting it drip down the back of his throat. He just kept a black cup close, spitting the blood into it whenever he needed to clear his mouth. Though he didn't know the consequences of swallowing blood, some part of Buck seemed to know it wouldn't be good.

Mostly, everything tasting like iron proved to be annoying, but not terribly critical.

He wondered how long it would take for someone to notice he didn't smile much either right now, as the action pulled on his face, leaving him whimpering every time he tried. Searing pain directly into his brain and gross, bloody drool - smiling was definitely not going to be on Buck's to-do list for a while.

Fortunately, most of the people at the station attributed his silence and accompanying gloominess to Maddie's leaving, and for the most part gave Buck his space. Well, everyone except for Eddie, who already knew the truth of the night in question, and Bobby. Despite everything Buck had done, Bobby still wanted to give him the benefit of the doubt. He came to Buck about a report from Chim, where he claimed Buck had been coming in to work drunk. Bobby looked firm as he promised he didn't believe Chim's claim, but he wanted to give Buck the chance to tell his side of the story.

He tried so hard not to alarm Bobby as he explained a little bit about the situation - without mentioning the punch or any of the after effects. He didn't know how much Bobby understood though, as pain made talking complicated while he tried not to dribble blood down his chin.

Buck nearly cried that night when Bobby laid out dinner on the table and the main dish was

revealed to be Buck's favorite, Bobby's famous baked Mac 'N' Cheese. Ordinarily Buck would have had at least three servings but that night, he couldn't even manage a single bite. He managed to placate Bobby by stirring up enough of his food around his plate so his coworker would believe he'd eaten. Then, when the rest of the crew had gone to sleep in the bunkroom, Buck attempted to make himself a protein shake. Loud and grating, the station house blender screamed into his ears and ratcheted his migraine to new heights and he might have broken it as he stabbed the button silent.

In the end, dinner ended up being one of the frozen smoothies Bobby kept in the station freezer, slightly thawed and sipped slowly through a straw. At first, the chill felt like heaven, Buck savoring the icy treat as it melted. Still, the strawberry got lost under the taste of iron and before he'd finished, Buck found himself forcing down what he'd only minutes before been enjoying. It churned in his gut and he hoped with every fiber of his soul he wouldn't throw it up.

He stayed away from any other food offerings for the rest of shift. He could wait until he got home. A smoothie made from scratch with oat milk and fresh fruit would taste better. And blended in the processor he knew to be silent, it wouldn't hurt his head either.

Things would get better. At this point, they had to. Right?

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Voicemail 3: October 14th, 2021 @ 12:30am PT

*Chim woke up in the middle of the night to the sound of Jee's soft sobs and an accompanying ping! from his phone. The phone he ignored as he scooped up his daughter and cradled her close, gathering the things he needed to change her diaper then make her a bottle. He yawned into the curls of her hair as he bounced her around their home away from home, soothing her back to sleep with his eyes half open before he laid her down in her bassinet. Only then did he check his phone, frowning as he saw Buck's name in his missed call log once more.*

*He grunted angrily, tossing the phone across the room so he wouldn't have to look at it and then climbed back into bed. Whatever was so important could wait - it couldn't be anywhere near as important as telling him about Maddie leaving.*

*The next morning he checked his voicemail, but the only thing Buck had recorded ended up being three straight minutes of quiet and wordless sobbing. Chim felt only a little guilty as he deleted that message too.*

*A moment's deliberation took place as he considered whether or not he wanted to listen to anymore unwelcome voicemails. At which point, he changed his voicemail message, borderline cruel as he insisted Buck stop calling him – he wouldn't be listening to any more of the messages he left.*

*Bending to press a kiss to Jee-Yun's nose, he murmured, "We don't need Uncle Buck, do we, Jee? No . . . we just need to find Mommy."*

Buck couldn't sleep.

Lying down felt like torture. Sitting up felt worse. Exhaustion tugged at every inch of his frame, but Buck couldn't even move from where he sat wedged in the corner of his bathroom. The bile swirling down the toilet looked pink with blood, confirming Buck's fear he'd been swallowing the blood despite all of his efforts.

Nearly midnight, Buck had never felt more alone in the loft he called his home. The shadows were deep and dark, slithering across the floor like snakes and binding him like a boa in their hopelessness. Some part of him wondered whether or not he was delirious, and if so, why. He swallowed hard then winced at the glide of iron down his throat, more blood joining the bile still churning in his gut.

He wanted someone with him - he didn't want to be alone here. Unfortunately, the people he wanted were out of his reach and would be for the foreseeable future.

Eddie had a son to raise. A Superman who needed him more than his exhausting best friend.

And Maddie . . . he sobbed a little, fumbling for his phone, pressing a button blindly as he tried to call his sister before attempting to press the plastic to his ear. Just the touch caused a cry of pain, the phone clattering to the floor from lifeless fingers. God he wanted his sister - he wanted to lay his head in her lap and feel her fingers in his hair, and know he wasn't alone in the dark.

He moved to lay down against the cool tile, taking comfort in the chill against overheated skin, before quietly crying himself to sleep.

He didn't know someone else heard his tears. He wouldn't have wanted to know they didn't care.

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Voicemail 4: October 19th, 2021 @ 6:00pm PT

*To say Chimney was surprised it took a week for Eddie to call him would be understating the matter drastically. Granted when he walked back into the hotel to find his phone blinking at him from the nightstand, he didn't immediately think of Eddie Diaz. Instead - despite a solid seven days without a voicemail from Buck - he thought Buck had ignored his order not to call and left him yet another voicemail.*

*Instead, Eddie's phone number practically glared at him from the screen and Chim could feel a shiver roll down the column of his spine. He could **feel** the rage emanating from the voicemail and took a moment to call Hen instead, just to give himself a head's up.*

*"Chim!" his best friend cheered through the phone, bright and cheerful as she greeted him warmly. "What's up, mon ami? You find your lady love yet?"*

*Chimney slumped, setting the car seat on the bed and smiling sadly at the slumbering visage of his daughter. "No, nothing. Wherever she is, she's not easy to find."*

*Hen sounded hesitant, causing him to cringe before she even finished speaking. "Buck told you she would be, didn't he? Told you she was okay, just needed space."*

*"Forgive me for not taking anything that the liar says without a grain of salt, Hen," he sneered, rage burning hot and angry in his chest again. "Which reminds me of the reason for my call. What's going on with Buck?"*

*Hen stayed quiet for a while before she asked, "Are we pretending to care now?"*

*"Eddie left a voicemail, so I want to know why he's calling to yell at me **before** I get yelled at."*

*"Nothing going on with Buck," she replied, causing his eyebrows to flare upwards in surprise. She continued. "He's been quiet lately, and a little tired, but he's missing Maddie." Her tone hardened a little as his best friend reminded him sharply before he could protest, "She is his **sister**, Chim.*

*He's allowed to miss her."*

*Chimney kept his snort silent, not wanting to spark Hen's ire. Apparently, she was on Buck's side that day, and wouldn't be willing to listen to Chimney's grievance. He waited a moment to see if she would say anything else, before grunting. "All right. I need to listen to this voicemail. Thanks, Hen."*

*"Chim," she insisted firmly, "it's time to forgive and forget."*

*He said nothing to that, simply hanging up and dialing into his voicemail. The automated voice recited Eddie's phone number before silence reigned. For a legitimate moment, Chimney thought Eddie might have butt dialed him. Except then his friend spoke, tone enraged in a way Chimney had never heard before. "You son of a bitch."*

*Chimney flinched at the statement, pulling the phone away to stare at the screen for a moment, before putting it back against his head just in time to hear Eddie speak again. "He's gonna forgive you for this, because Buck's a good person. But I won't, Howard - I will **never** forgive you for forcing me to find my best friend passed out in the shower, hypothermic and leaking blood from his mouth. I will not forgive and I for damn sure will not forget. And if I can get a hold of Maddie before you do, Howard?" He snickered, the tone dark and demonic. "I would hope to God she's in a forgiving mood."*

*The message clicked off and the sensation of dread Chimney had brushed aside as unrealistic came roaring back once more. Something had happened to Buck. And from the sounds of it . . . the punch Chimney had thrown at his face might be at fault.*

It all came tumbling down after Buck tripped over a chair.

Of all the asinine, moronic, bullshit ways to get caught hiding the pain in his head, his inability to eat, and the steadily encroaching spots in his vision . . . it happened after he tripped over a fucking chair.

It hadn't even been a chair that someone had moved out of place. The damned thing had been in the same place it always was, but Buck had gone ass over teakettle when he'd attempted to go around it. He hit the ground with a soft cry, hands roughed up by the carpet and knees aching from the rough landing. Fortunately, he'd managed to keep his head from banging on the floor, but even still, the persistent pain throbbing in his cheek roared once again into unavoidable prominence.

Buck wasn't ashamed to admit to how he'd burst into tears.

Next thing he knew, knees crouched on each side of him as gentle hands pulled his arms up over shoulders and hauled him carefully to his feet. Buck sobbed, trying to lean away from the left side of his face, resting his right temple against Bobby's shoulder as his captain and Eddie got him situated onto the couch in the loft. "Hen, med kit," Bobby ordered sharply, helping Eddie lower Buck down before taking a seat on the coffee table in front of him. "Buck . . . Evan, talk to me."

"I'm sorry," Buck sobbed, hand coming up to press gingerly on the left side of his face next to his eye and wincing hard.

Bobby frowned, fingers threading through Buck's own as Bobby pulled his hand away, other hand coming up to turn Buck's face - and the lingering bruise - into the light. "I don't recall saying anything, Buck."

Buck flinched at the gentle press of Eddie's hands against the side of his face, pain shooting like a

lance through his brain. “Ouch,” he whimpered, eyes closing as he resisted the urge to pull away.

“Your face still hurts!?” Eddie demanded, hands gentling dramatically as he tried to determine the extent of the damage. “It’s been a week, Buck.”

“What’s been a week?” Bobby demanded, accepting the medical kit from Hen and flipping it open in search of an ice pack. “Wait – what happened a week ago?”

Buck watched his captain – the closest thing he had to a father – as the older man squeezed the ice pack to activate the chemicals inside before pressing it gently to Buck’s face. Bobby’s thumb smoothed tenderly across Buck’s opposite cheekbone while the other held it to his face, touch soothing in response to the involuntary whimper Buck let free at the pressure. Out of the corner of his eye, Buck could see the silent conversation happening between Hen and Eddie, both of them no doubt in the know about what happened.

Granted, their information came from very different sources, but Hen was Chim’s best friend – she had to know what Buck had done to deserve it. At least she’d been kind enough not to say anything to him about it.

Still, Buck’s head shook in response to Bobby’s question, though whether he was unwilling or unable to explain Buck wasn’t entirely sure. Which meant everyone could hear the searing burn of Eddie’s anger as he answered Bobby instead. “Buck got punched by Chimney a week ago. Took a hell of a hook to the left eye.”

“What?” Bobby demanded, jaw hardening as he took in Buck’s face with new eyes and more information. “You didn’t tell me he punched you, Buck!”

“It’s fine,” Buck insisted firmly, despite the tears in his eyes. He could hear the desperation in his tone as he implored Bobby to believe him. “I’m fine. I deserved it, okay? It’s fine.”

Buck could see the indecision on his captain’s face, those eyes watching him carefully. Finally, Bobby sighed. “I will reiterate. When we talked about the situation, Buck, you didn’t tell me Chim punched you.”

“It didn’t happen on the clock,” Buck assured him firmly. “I didn’t want it to cause problems at work. Please, Bobby . . . it’s not his fault.”

“He punched you,” Bobby reminded him firmly. “Regardless of the reason for it, throwing the fist would make it his fault.” He took a deep breath then shook his head. “Buck, how long has your head hurt?”

“A week?” Buck hedged, shoulders lifting upwards as he tried to sink into himself.

One eyebrow cocked upwards as Bobby pressed his advantage. “And have you been checked out yet?”

“It was a punch to the face, Bobby,” Buck reminded him with a frown. “I got hit in the face with a bowling ball on a string, and managed to stay on a damned ladder. No, I haven’t been checked out yet.”

Bobby snorted, unable to argue that point. “Okay, but I’m pretty sure your depth perception is shot to hell. So I want Hen to . . .”

Everyone looked up as the bell went off, interrupting Bobby and earning a mild wince from Buck. Bobby pushed to his feet, shouting orders at the rest of the crew, before looking down at Buck as



he went to move. “Oh no, boyo,” he ordered, hands on his shoulders and pushing him back onto the couch, “you’re going home.”

“Bobby,” Buck absolutely did not whine, even as he conceded that going home sounded like a great idea. He’d been exhausted all day, and the thought of his own bed sounded like heaven. “I’m all right.”

“You’re not,” he insisted with a firm shake of his head. “So I’m going to call you an Uber to take you home, okay? Eddie or I will come check on you tonight - we both have keys to the loft.”

Leaning a little into the gentle ruffling Bobby smoothed through his hair, Buck nodded miserably. “Okay.”

“Good. Go home, take a shower, take some **Tylenol**, then go to bed. We’ll let ourselves in.” Moving away, Bobby stopped and turned back with a frown, “And Buck - you wait for the Uber. You really shouldn’t drive yourself right now, okay? Not if your depth perception is so badly off.”

Buck sunk back into the couch with a miserable nod. “Yes, Bobby.”

Soft footsteps thumped against the linoleum, before Bobby leaned over him and pressed a kiss into his hair. “Love you, kiddo. Get some rest, okay?”

The younger man grinned up at him tiredly, tone almost teasing as he joked, “You got it, Pops.”

“Gah,” Bobby grunted with an exaggerated roll of his eyes, “you young punks, thinking you’re so funny.”

Buck chuckled, letting himself fall sideways onto the couch as Bobby clattered down the ladder. Moments later, the siren on the truck went off and Buck rolled to bury his face into the cushions with a groan. He stayed where he laid until the sirens faded away, then levered himself up to go get changed out of his uniform and pack his things up for the day.

Ten minutes later, he sat in the back of the Uber, eyes closed as the driver took him home to his loft.

Getting up the stairs to his apartment happened in a blur, black spots speckling his vision as he stumbled along. He figured he must have looked bad when even Veronica didn’t take the opportunity to snipe at him when he trudged past her towards his front door. He started stripping the second the lock clicked on the door, trudging up the stairs to his bathroom and his absolutely heavenly shower.

Flicking the tap on as hot as he could stand, Buck fumbled in his medicine cabinet for the ibuprofen. It seemed like he fought with the damn cap for a solid ten minutes before the two halves came apart in a spray of tablets. “Fuck,” he breathed, eyes closing against the pain in his head before he set the bottle down and bent over to start picking up the fallen medication.

Granted, he barely moved before white hot pain stabbed through his left eye, buried like a blade all the way to the occipital lobe. He whimpered, then abandoned the search in favor of just fumbling a half a handful into his mouth and swallowing the chalky pills dry. Then he climbed under the spray and braced his forehead against the wall.

As much as Buck didn’t want to admit it, Bobby had been right to send him home. The pain seemed to be escalating and he could feel his knees shaking with the effort it took to remain standing. The black spots in his left eye were spreading and all he could taste was iron, the aftertaste of the pills nonexistent.

He didn't even register he'd gone to the floor until his head hit the lip of his tub. He couldn't fight the drag on his eyelids and, just before he passed out, he breathed out, "I'm sorry, Chim. I'm so sorry."

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The sinking pit in Eddie's stomach had been growing since they left Buck alone at the station when the bell rang. Which might be why, when everyone got back on the truck to head towards the station, Eddie climbed up into the driver's seat and banished McCallum to the backseat. He turned to Bobby in the Captain's chair, the both of them sober and afraid before Eddie hit the sirens and turned the truck towards the loft.

"You feel it too?" Bobby asked, his tone low enough that only Eddie could have possibly heard him.

Eddie didn't even need clarification on what **it** was. "Something's wrong," he agreed, guiding the engine easily through the streets as he sped along. "Hen will just have to forgive us for not bringing her along."

"How bad was it, Eddie?"

"He had ice on it that first night," Eddie promised. "He called me as soon as it happened, asked me to make sure there wasn't any damage to the inside of his mouth. Then I forced him to keep ice on it for as long as he could stand it. Ran concussion checks the whole night. He seemed okay."

"And now?"

Eddie shifted the engine into a higher gear. "Buck is **not** okay."

Bobby groaned, twisting around and reaching for the first aid kit McCallum was handing him from the backseat. "I really hoped you weren't going to say that."

"Yeah," Eddie sighed, pulling the engine to a stop outside of the apartment complex and hopping out of the driver's seat in a hot second, "me too."

McCallum promised to stay with the truck, and let Dispatch know what had happened to the 118 Engine, leaving the other two men to pound feet towards the stairs and Eddie already cursing the fact he didn't have his keys. Fortunately they didn't need them as the building manager was standing at the door, searching for his own. Both picked up speed, startling the man as they bolted forward. "What are you doing?" he demanded, glowering warily at the two firefighters.

"We got a call for this apartment," Eddie announced firmly, the lie coming easily. Fortunately, both were in their pants and suspenders, so it would be a hard lie to disprove. "What are **you** doing?"

"Neighbor downstairs says the water's been running for an hour," he replied. "Now, he's paying for it, but that messes with my water heaters, so it needs to stop." Eyes narrowing, the man pulled the keys away from the lock and folded his arms, demanding, "Who called you, exactly?"

"Why does that matter?" Eddie demanded.

Fortunately, Bobby had decided that enough was enough. His eyes were hard and worried as he ordered, "Either you open the door or I'll smash it in. Which would you prefer?"

The two glared at each other for a while, with Eddie a helpless observer, before Bobby shifted his grip on his halligan. The manager's eyes widened at the realization Eddie's captain wasn't joking,

his fingers fumbling with the keys as he turned back to Buck's door and started to unlock the door. Eddie shoved the man out of the way the second the panel swung inwards, striding into the loft and shouting, "Buck!?"

Bobby was already bolting up the stairs towards the loft, calling out, "Evan?"

Eddie moved towards the downstairs bathroom, before the sound of Bobby shouting Buck's name from upstairs - the sound worried and frightened - sent Eddie running for the stairs. Eddie burst into the bathroom to find Bobby knelt next to the bathtub, crouched over the motionless and naked form of his best friend. "Eddie," Bobby ordered, hands flashing as he shut off the water, "I need towels, and a blanket off the bed."

The former soldier stared at the shivering form of his best friend, Buck's lips blue and teeth chattering as Bobby bent to get his arms under his knees and shoulders. Bobby's voice barked, jolting Eddie out of his shock, as he ordered, "Now, Eddie! He's freezing!"

Eddie nearly fell over, bolting for the linen closet and pulling out the thick towels Buck only used for guests, then ripping the heavy comforter off the bed. Bobby carried Buck out of the bathroom, setting him down on the towels Eddie laid out on the ground, curled up on his right side in recovery. Then he ripped free one of the towels Eddie still held and started to rub Buck down as vigorously as he could manage. "Call 911," Bobby ordered, his Captain's eyes warring with a father's terror as he looked up at Eddie. "He needs heated saline. His core temperature is too low."

Eddie reached for his radio, triggering it immediately as he announced down the line, "Dispatch, this is engine 118 at 4452 Rainbow Road Apt 303, requesting immediate medical evac. White male, early thirties, six foot two and approximately a hundred ninety pounds. Patient is currently unconscious and likely hypothermic, with visible shivering evident in all extremities."

"Engine 118, this is Dispatch," a voice spoke – a voice entirely too familiar to both of them. Bobby and Eddie both winced as May Grant's voice wobbled. "Ambulance is en route. Best ETA is gonna be about five minutes." A pause and then a soft sound that could have been a sob, before May asked, "Eddie, is Buck okay?"

"We don't know, May," Bobby replied gently, still rubbing Buck down. "We'll update you when you know. And May? Do not call your mother – I'll call her when we get to the emergency room."

Eddie didn't bother speaking, just picked up a leg and started rubbing a second towel briskly over the skin. Then, once Buck was dry, Bobby lifted him so Eddie could wrap the comforter around him, the two tucking it as tightly around him as possible. "He's not going to want to be naked," Eddie insisted, looking up at Bobby with wide eyes.

Bobby grunted, one hand on Buck's shoulder while the other smoothed tenderly through his hair. "I know," he sighed, eyes pinned to Buck's face just in case he came to. "You know where he keeps his sweats?"

"Bottom drawer of the dresser," Eddie replied, already pushing to his feet and moving to grab a set. Rifling through for a ragged pair, just in case the hospital cut them off, Eddie also rummaged through the upper drawers in search of a pair of boxers. Then, between the two of them, Eddie and Bobby were able to get Buck dressed without having to unwrap him too much from the comforter.

Once the comforter was secured around Buck's body again, Bobby lifted the younger man into his arms and cradled him close, free hand rubbing briskly along the fabric in hopes of creating enough friction to start to warm Buck and maybe lure him back to consciousness. "I shouldn't have let him leave the station," Bobby insisted, head bowed over the young man the entire station knew Bobby

saw as a son. "I should have made him stay and taken him home myself."

"We both let him leave," Eddie insisted, anger building deep within the pit of his chest. "He wouldn't blame us, and we're not going to blame ourselves either. Buck is gonna need us when he wakes up, calm and rational and attentive."

"It's a zygomatic break," Bobby announced into the room, apropos of nothing and earning a confused look from Eddie.

"A what?"

"A zygomaticomaxillary complex fracture," Bobby replied. "It's the second most common facial injury, typically occurring in young males and usually as a result of blunt force trauma to the face."

Eddie groaned. "Shit."

"I cannot believe I didn't see it," Bobby replied, head tucked over the top of Buck's head. "All of the symptoms match, but I didn't know he got punched in the face, so I didn't make the connection."

"That's on us," Eddie protested fervently, "Specifically me. He didn't want to get Chim into trouble, so he wouldn't let me say anything. And I didn't press. Clearly, I should have."

Devastation lined the older man's face as he met Eddie's eyes. "Eddie, he could go blind just blowing his nose. He's probably been swallowing blood by the gallon. And the constant migraine . . . that's not even the worst of it. It explains the clumsiness, the depth perception issues, his persistent exhaustion, unwillingness to eat. Hell, it even explains the quiet - moving his jaw probably feels like someone stabbing hot pokers into his face."

"We're going to get him help, Bobby," Eddie insisted, one hand coming up to rest on his captain's shoulder. "Your son is gonna be okay."

Bobby looked up at Eddie with startled eyes. "He's not my son."

"Coulda fooled me from here, man," Eddie replied, getting up at the sound of paramedics shouting from downstairs. "Up here!"

Leaving Bobby to deal with the paramedics, Eddie started gathering things Buck would need during a potentially lengthy hospital stay, shoving them all into a bag. Then started poking in all the usual places for Buck's cell phone, cussing steadily when it wasn't plugged into the charger on Buck's nightstand, or in the kitchen, or in the bathroom. "Fuck!" he growled, rifling through Buck's work bag in case Buck hadn't bothered to get it out when he got home.

"What?" Bobby demanded, helping the paramedics get Buck onto the backboard for transport down the stairs.

Eddie absolutely did not scream as he barked back, "I can't find his fucking phone."

"Check his clothes," his captain suggested, tersely. "It might be in his jeans."

Fingers snapping, Eddie leaped for the pile of clothes Buck had been wearing that day. Finally, he located the cell phone sitting on the floor under his jeans and grabbed it up, checking the charge on it and shoving it into one of his tactical pockets. "Got it!" he called, coming back to the knot of people kneeling on Buck's floor. "How's he doing?"

“Depressed breath sounds, and a slight whistle in his breathing,” the paramedic – Connie Madison from the 19, unless Eddie missed his guess – recited, hands deft on his to take a corner of the backboard. “His jaw is very swollen – we might need to intubate if we can’t get better breath sounds in transit.”

Bobby visibly paled, Eddie’s hand coming up to grip his shoulder firmly. “All right,” Eddie replied to her with a nod. “Are we good to transport?”

“Grab a corner,” she ordered.

Eddie leaned over for the duffle bag with Buck’s things, hauling it over his shoulder before grabbing a corner of the backboard. “Ready when you are.”

“All right, on three.”

The woman had the kind of no-nonsense briskness Eddie remembered from medics in the Army and he found comfort in it as she counted down so they all lifted in unison. Eddie and Bobby released the backboard once the paramedics had it, moving his best friend’s body slowly down the stairwell. The two firefighters followed behind, Eddie pulling Buck’s phone from his pocket and starting to fidget with it as he typed in Buck’s password and then scrolled through his contacts looking for Maddie.

“What are you doing?”

“Gotta call Maddie,” Eddie replied, looking over at Bobby with cautious eyes. “She shouldn’t hear about this from the hospital.”

“Why don’t you call from your phone, then? You have her number.”

Eddie hit the number and lifted the phone to his ear, even as he answered Bobby’s question. “Buck’s calls are the only calls Maddie is answering or returning right now. The call has to come from Buck.”

“How do you know she’s answering Buck’s calls?”

“They talk all the time,” Eddie replied, just as Maddie’s voicemail message began to speak in his ear. He looked over at Bobby with a small smile, letting it play as he insisted, “She promised him she wouldn’t leave him again. She’s keeping her promise.”

The beep signaled the end of her voicemail message and Eddie turned his attention onto the call. “Hey Maddie, it’s Eddie. Look, I know you’re somewhere getting help – Buck told me that much – but I didn’t want you to find out about this from the hospital . . .”

\*\_\*\_\*\_\*\_\*

Maddie stepped out of Saint Timothy’s Catholic Church and lifted her face into the shine of the Los Angeles sun. Her time at the Resilience Treatment Center for Mental Health had been good for her, giving her clarity in her thoughts as well as making sure to provide her with the medications she needed to feel better. She didn’t feel nearly as fatigued as she’d felt on the duloxetine, the new medications allowed her to feel clear headed and confident once again in her ability to be a good mom. Her sweet Jee slipping beneath the water had been an accident, but despite Maddie’s fears, her therapist had assured her she’d done everything right in the aftermath.

The important thing to remember was that parents occasionally made mistakes. It was how they came back from those mistakes that made all the difference in the world.

Not to mention, the calls with her baby brother – every other night, at six o'clock on the dot – helped to remind her how good a mom she really was. Maddie all but raised her brother on her own; tended to each of his hurts, soothed his nightmares, and calmed his fears. She had been a mom before she'd ever had Jee. It felt good to remember that; felt good to know her brother had her back and always would. Even when Maddie faltered, Evan would be there to lift her back to her feet again.

Still, she did have a curfew and would need to get back to the treatment center soon so she didn't miss it. Her therapist – a ball busting woman with a steel spine and a kind smile by the name of Brittany – had expressed her confidence in Maddie only that morning. Another couple more weeks would give Maddie the stability she needed to go home to Jee, Howard, and Evan. Follow up appointments every week would help her maintain that stability until at last Maddie would be comfortable on her own.

Maddie couldn't wait.

She longed to hold her sweet girl, breathing in the milk and lavender scent of her. Maddie felt as though she had the time now – the time to make sure Jee's memories of her were good ones. The time to be there for her daughter in a way her illness had not allowed before. The battle had been hard, but the war would be won in Maddie's favor. She could be a good mother to Jee – her sweet brother had reminded her of that.

As she walked, she pulled her phone out of her pocket and turned it back on. She tried to keep the cell phone off during her time at the cathedral, wanting to take in the peace it offered as well as revel in the silence the treatment center didn't often provide. Granted, she didn't usually receive any calls while there, but it had become a habit over the last couple weeks.

She faltered a little when her home screen came up and there was a missed call notification, the screen reading off the phone number as belonging to her brother. Her normal call with Evan would be that night, and he'd promised he was okay the last time they'd spoken two nights before. Not to mention, she made it a point to keep up with Evan's schedule so they would both have advanced warning if they had to reschedule their calls. Or when not to call, so she didn't have to speak with Howard until she was ready.

He'd left a voicemail for her, and Maddie dialed in immediately, curious about what had been so important it couldn't wait until that night. She slowed to a stop when Eddie's voice spoke instead, her blood freezing to ice in her veins as he spoke. "Hey Maddie, it's Eddie." The breath her brother's best friend took after that was shaky and concerned and Maddie could feel herself starting to shake, fear for her brother overriding everything else at that moment. "Look, I know you're somewhere getting help – Buck told me that much – but I didn't want you to find out about this from the hospital . . ."

Maddie didn't even wait to listen to the rest of the call. She hung up and instantly dialed Eddie Diaz, hoping to **GOD** her brother was okay.

Eddie had apparently been expecting her call, his tone gentle as he addressed her once the phone stopped ringing. "Hey, Maddie."

"What happened?" she demanded, choked and horrified at the thought of her brother hurt and alone.

"It's really not my place to say, Maddie," he insisted, anger burning down the phone line like a living thing. "We're at Cedars-Sinai – they rushed Buck back for emergency surgery. I don't know how long it'll take you to get here . . ."

Maddie interrupted him, already turning to flag down a taxi. "Fifteen minutes. I'm not far from there. I'm coming. Meet me in the emergent waiting area."

She could hear Eddie sputtering, "Wait . . . fifteen minutes?! Where are you?" though she didn't bother to reply. Instead she hung up the phone and climbed into the back of the slowing taxi, ordering firmly, "Cedars-Sinai Medical Center, please."

"You got it, lady."

"Hold on, Ev," she breathed as she rested her head against the glass of the window. "I'm coming."

\*\_\*\_\*\_\*\_\*\_\*

Bobby stared at Eddie as he pulled the phone away from his ear, staring at it in shock. "What did Maddie say? When can she get here?"

The younger man was silent for a long time, clearly trying to assimilate the information Buck's sister had given him, before he looked up at Bobby with startled eyes. "She said she'd be here in fifteen minutes."

Caught off guard, Bobby blinked. "Minutes? You don't mean hours?"

"No, she **clearly** said minutes. And then she hung up on me, so I guess we're going to find out if that's true or not."

"That doesn't make sense," he insisted with a frown. "Isn't Chim in like Kansas or something?"

"Last Hen said, yeah," Eddie replied, snorting softly. "Han's in the Midwest and his girlfriend didn't even leave the city limits. That's hilarious."

"Somehow, I don't think he's going to see it that way."

"That is his problem and not mine," Eddie snarled, his rage burning through the air like a living thing.

"Calm down, Eddie," Bobby insisted with a frown. "We're both upset about this, but there's nothing we can do about it until Chim comes home. Right now, our main focus has to be Buck."

"I know," he replied, shoving his hands back through his hair and blowing out a frustrated breath. "Still, I can't help wanting to punch **him** in the face. Pretty sure the asshole would deserve it."

"Maybe, but you'd be angry at yourself for it once you'd done it," Bobby replied as the sliding doors scraped open and his wife, Athena Grant-Nash, came bolting through the doors, shouting his name. "We're here, 'Thena."

"What happened?" she demanded, bolting into his arms and closing her arms around him tightly. "Is it the Buckaroo?"

"I'm still not sure I have all the details," he replied with a sigh, pressing a kiss to her forehead. "I guess we're just going to have to wait and see."

"Is he okay?"

"Emergency surgery," he replied with a shake of his head. "We'll find out when they know a little more about what they're dealing with."

“How did this happen?” she asked, stepping back and looking up at him with concern. “He seemed okay earlier. A little quiet, but all right.”

“It’s a zygomatic fracture,” Bobby replied. At the confusion on her face, he reached up to touch the bone on the outside of her eye socket, “This bone here broke, pretty seriously from what I could hear as they were wheeling him away.”

“Has anyone called Maddie?” she asked, fumbling for her own phone.

Athena looked up at her husband in shock, as both he and Eddie snorted at the question. Bobby leaned over to kiss her cheek then guided her into the seat next to him. “She’s on her way.”

“When is she going to get here? Does she need someone to pick her up from the airport?”

“No,” Eddie replied, the hilarity of the situation starting to catch up with him now that he’d had the time to process it. “Sounds like a taxi is gonna drop her off here in about another ten minutes.”

Athena stared at him, blinking in shock for a long moment before turning to pin her husband with narrowed eyes. “Translate that.”

“Maddie never left the city,” Bobby replied with a shake of his head. “Chimney went off on a wild goose chase, and Maddie’s been here in Los Angeles the whole time.”

“You’re kidding.”

“I’m not.”

The married couple stared at each other for a long time before Athena huffed out a soft sound, her eyes rolling as she muttered caustically, “Of course you’re not.” Pinning him with a sharp look, she demanded, “Did Chimney even bother to check any of the local treatment centers for her, or did he just assume she’d run away?”

“I don’t know,” Bobby replied with a shrug. “That would be a question for Hen.”

“Oh shit, Hen,” Eddie breathed, fumbling once more for his phone.

Athena let out a bitter little laugh. “Oh shit is right. She’s got some words for you two, boyo, and I’d be prepared to sit still for them. She called me just after Bobby did, wondering what the hell was going on and why McCallum brought the engine back alone with the news that Buckley had been transported to Cedars with you two in faithful attendance.”

“Does she know?”

“She spoke to Dispatch before she called me,” Athena replied, lips pressed together. “For what it might be worth, I’m not sure Chimney is her favorite person right now.”

Eddie snorted a little. “Chim’s her best friend. She’ll forgive him. Hell, she’s probably calling him right now.”

Athena shook her head, her eyebrows furrowed as she stared off towards something only she could see. “No, I don’t think so. She’s upset that she didn’t notice something wrong with the Buckaroo before Bobby sent him home today. And then finding out from Dispatch he’d been transported here?”

“None of us thought anything was wrong,” Bobby reminded his wife with a rueful smile. “We all



thought Buck was just missing Maddie, and then being separated from Jee after Chim left. This is on all of us.”

The door clattered open behind Eddie and he whirled around at the sharp shout of his name, “Eddie!”

Maddie Buckley looked fierce and determined as she jogged up to him and shoved him sharply, demanding, “What the hell happened to my brother?”

“Maddie . . .” Athena coaxed, trying to calm her down.

“No!” she interrupted, pulling out of reach with a withering stare, before turning back to Eddie. “I just spoke to Evan two days ago, and he promised me everything was okay. So I need someone to explain to me why the hell you’re calling me that Buck’s been rushed here for emergency surgery. Because none of this is making a damned bit of sense.”

Some small part of Eddie wanted to be angry at Maddie – her leaving had been the catalyst for all of this in the first place. Asking Buck to make the promise he had, to not tell Chimney Maddie had told Buck she was leaving and to keep him safe for her.

The rest of him acknowledged that Maddie looked **better** than she had the last time he’d seen her almost four months before.

Buck’s big sister looked vibrant and fierce, not at all like the sullen or withdrawn young mother who’d appeared overwhelmed and terrified at Jee’s christening party. Going away had very evidently been the right thing to do, both for herself and for Jee. It wasn’t her fault Chimney had lost the plot when she’d disappeared. And Eddie had to believe that had she known how Chimney would react – known Chimney would take out her leaving on Buck – she wouldn’t have disappeared the way she had.

Still, she left Chimney the video explaining her intentions. She left Jee somewhere safe, seeing as Chimney likely wouldn’t have let Maddie go considering how he’d reacted to her being gone. She got help, and seeing her now, Eddie had faith Maddie wouldn’t be leaving again anytime soon.

Ah hell. Eddie really did not look forward to having to tell her Chimney had taken her daughter on a wild goose chase. Or that it could take hours for him to bring Jee back to her. How did he always get stuck with the shitty jobs?

He reached out carefully, laying his hands on her shoulders. “Buck got hit in the face about two weeks ago. It broke the zygomatic bone, but none of us knew that.”

“Got hit in the face?” she echoed with a frown. “By who? On a case?”

“. . . no, not on a call.”

“Then how?” she demanded. “How did this happen to him?”

*Saved by the bell*, was all Eddie could think when a voice called from the doors, “Family for Evan Buckley?”

Maddie aimed a glare at him, a clear indication that their conversation was not over, before whirling away and rushing towards the surgeon. “I’m Maddie Buckley – I’m his sister. How is Evan?”

“He came through like a champ,” the man replied with a small smile. “He’s in recovery right now,

but he's doing well. We went through his mouth to complete the reconstruction, then intubated him to help him breathe a little easier. We packed the wound with gauze and we're going to keep the compression bandage on for at least the next twelve hours. After that, we'll see how the swelling looks and make any further decisions at that time."

"Prognosis?" Maddie asked, eyes wide and scared.

"It's gonna take a couple weeks for everything to heal," the surgeon replied. His features firmed as he addressed Maddie directly, "It is imperative he does not blow his nose – there was significant compromise to the orbital socket and getting air into that socket will terminate his sight. If you do not want him to go blind, he cannot blow his nose. No matter how sick he gets."

"Sick he gets?" Bobby echoed with a frown.

"Right now, I'm most concerned about a sinus infection," he replied with a sigh. "Mr. Buckley came in hypothermic and we're still trying to get his temperature up to something closer to normal. I'm hopeful the drop in his core temperature is the reason behind the abnormal production of mucus I'm seeing in his sinuses, but if it's not, he's going to be in for a hell of a haul. We have a drain running from his sinuses to his stomach right now, so there's no post nasal drop. We'll see if that helps."

Maddie took a deep breath, and Eddie watched her assimilate that information before nodding sharply. Looking up at the surgeon with an expression Eddie figured she'd used a lot as a charge nurse, she insisted, "I'd like to see my brother, please."

"Absolutely," he replied with a nod. "Only one at a time while he's in recovery, but once we get him settled into one of the step-down units, he's allowed up at four at a time during visiting hours."

"I'll be staying overnight," she insisted firmly, pinning the man with a fierce look as he moved to protest. The woman was in her element and allowed no quarter as she continued, "Mr. Diaz and Mr. Nash will also be staying as well, as I'm sure it will require more than the security you have on site to move them."

The surgeon watched her for a moment, before sighing. "By any chance – did you use to be a nurse?"

"A charge nurse, at a hospital in Hershey," she replied with a tight smile.

He chuckled. "You want a job?" After a moment he nodded with a sigh. "I'll leave the instructions with the overnight staff, so they're aware."

"Excellent," she chirped, suddenly sunny and cheerful in a turnaround that would have given Eddie whiplash if he hadn't been expecting it. "Then I'd like to see my brother. Thank you."

He nodded and turned away, heading back towards the doors. Maddie twisted to look up at Eddie, a small smile on her face as she reached out to touch his arm. "He's gonna be okay, Eddie. I promise."

Eddie nodded, all at once consumed by total faith in his best friend's sister. He didn't know why he'd forgotten that Maddie was a Buckley, or that she possessed the rather legendary Buckley stubbornness, but he had. She had come back to herself and Eddie knew without a shadow of a doubt that at this exact moment, there could be no fiercer protector of Buck than his sister.

"Thanks, Maddie."

“No, Eddie,” she insisted with a firm shake of her head, “thank you. You took care of him when I couldn’t even take care of myself. I’m glad you’re his friend – he needs a friend like you in his life.”

“Honest to God, one of the highest honors of my life, Maddie.”

She chuckled a little, then nodded in acceptance of his announcement, before rushing off after the surgeon. And then all there was left to do . . . was wait.

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Buck didn’t know how long he’d been asleep. The last thing he remembered was stepping under the spray to take a shower. He sort of remembered falling down, but it felt hazy and far away, as though hidden behind a curtain of numbness. How had he gone from lying in the bottom of his tub to . . . here . . . where **was** here?

He fought with his own eyes, struggling to open them as the sounds of the room around him came back to him. The soft sounds of snoring were evident off to his left, as well as soft huffing from another source on the same side. He could hear the rustling flick of pages in a book on his right, as well as soft, even breathing from the reader. Absently, he could feel the touch of a hand holding his on that side, the skin soft but calloused and achingly familiar. He could even hear the sound of air whooshing in and out of the tube in his mouth, and feel the movement of his chest as the machine breathed for him. Too tired to even fight against it, he allowed it to work, letting out a soft whimper of sound in hopes of drawing someone’s attention.

“Evan,” came a voice from his right, a voice possessed by the single most beloved person in Evan’s entire world.

A muffled thump of a book accompanied the dull smack of her reading material against his blanket covered foot, before his sister’s face appeared in his eyeline. Those eyes scanned him carefully, before she smiled warmly and her hand came up to rest against his cheek. There seemed to be some kind of bandage on his face, but the pressure of her hand against his skin felt a little like heaven anyway. “It’s all right, Ev,” Maddie soothed gently as he fought to keep his eyes open. “I’m here. You’re alright. Just take your time – there’s no rush. Try not to fight the ventilator, okay? It’s doing its job and helping you get stronger.”

He couldn’t talk with the tube down his throat and didn’t really want to either with the pain in his face. It hurt to **breathe**, despite the ventilator’s consistent rhythm.

But Buck could whimper and did, rolling his head a little bit to press into his sister’s touch. His eyes fluttered for a moment before he really looked at her, relieved to see his sister looking like his sister once again. He whined a little around the tube, all but yearning for her as he tried to shuffle closer.

Fortunately, Maddie had been translating Buck for longer than anyone else and shook her head, stilling him gently. “You’re so spoiled,” she teased gently, coaxing him to stillness once more before settling onto the mattress next to him and pulling him to lean back against her chest with his head on her shoulder. “It’s all right, Evan.” Her fingers were tender in the strands of his hair as she insisted, “Go ahead and cry, sweetheart. You’ve been so brave, but it’s okay now. I’m here . . . you don’t have to be brave anymore.”

Buck didn’t even hesitate. He just burst into tears.

# Fragments

## Chapter Summary

The definition of the word **fragment** is as follows:

frag·ment | \ 'frag-mənt \

a part broken off, detached, or incomplete

to fall to pieces

to break up or apart into fragments

But sometimes it just means, something is irrevocably broken.

## Chapter Notes

OKAY SO! Apparently people wanted a second part of this fic and . . . yeah, this happened. There **WILL** be a third part too because the story isn't quite over yet I don't think. Thank you so for the amazing response - it meant the world to me.

Enjoy and I can't wait to hear what you think! You're all amazing!



Henrietta Wilson had been friends with Howard Han for . . . well, it had been a long time. Damn, had it really been a decade at this point? She'd watch him go through the Tatiana year. Been there for every step of his recovery following the rebar through his skull. Supported him as he struggled with the appearance of Albert. Hell, they'd been through a pandemic together. She couldn't even begin to express how happy for him she'd been when he met Maddie and the two fell in love and had Jee. Even with everything pertaining to Maddie's PPD, Chim had never really looked happier.

Granted, their relationship had never been particularly one-sided either. Chimney had been the first person at the 118 to hold out a hand of friendship. After Hen's mistake with Eva and the whole situation that resulted, he'd remained her best friend despite his disapproval of her choice. Chim had been one of her fiercest cheerleaders when Hen announced her intention to go to medical school and could always be counted on to study with her if she needed to.

The two had been there for each other in some of the hardest situations either of them had ever faced.

The need to tell her best friend off might be the hardest obstacle their friendship would ever need to

overcome.

Chimney had gone entirely off the deep end when Maddie had left, needing time and space to get herself healthy again. To find out he'd punched Buck in the face with the kind of force behind it, it broke the zygoma? It didn't make sense with the Chimney Han that Hen had always known.

Currently Hen sat with Maddie in Buck's ICU room, listening to the quiet pump of the ventilator as it continued to breathe for him. After they'd allowed him to wake up the first time, to confirm cognizance and reflexes, the doctors at Cedars had been militant about making sure Buck remained sedated to promote healing. Hen didn't think Maddie had left her brother's side since she'd arrived, a bag of her things brought by Hen when she'd stopped by that very first time.

"Are you okay, Hen?" Maddie asked, one thumb sketching tender circles over the back of her brother's hand despite her attention on Hen. "You've been quiet. And I know Evan's not exactly the best conversationalist right now, but I'm always willing to talk if you need to."

Hen shook her head a little bit, forcing a smile as she tried to force her thoughts into words. "You really never left the city?"

"No," she replied with a shake of her head.

"Did Buck know where you'd gone?" Hen asked, frowning.

Maddie's head shook again, her lips twisting into a meager smile. "I didn't want Evan to have to lie to Howie, so I didn't tell him. He knew I was in treatment and that, if he needed me, I was close enough I could get to him quickly. He didn't know anything else."

Hen nodded leaning forward to rest her elbows on the edge of the mattress as she considered Buck's slack face, his mouth stretched obscenely around the vent as the machine continued to breathe for him. It alarmed Hen to know that things had gotten bad and she hadn't noticed at all - she'd been so focused on Chim's constant complaints and his frustration with Buck she bought into Chim's narrative, hook line and sinker.

"What exactly did you make Buck promise you?"

"Not to tell Chimney I told Evan I was leaving," she replied with a tilted smile. "And to look after Jee for me. I didn't want to leave her, I just . . . I didn't trust myself, so I didn't feel like I could stay. Pushing through it felt like hell; it was just making everything worse. I wasn't getting any better."

"And then the black out happened."

Maddie nodded ruefully. "And then the blackout happened," she echoed. "Jee slipped beneath the water because I was inattentive for a second and . . . I panicked. My body had already tricked me into believing myself to be a terrible mother, and I couldn't put her in danger anymore." She turned to face Hen with tearing eyes, looking entirely wrecked as she confessed, "I love her too much to ever want anything bad to happen to her, Hen. So many things could have gone wrong - what if I'd fallen asleep a little deeper, or what if I hadn't heard her slip under the water? I needed help, and Chim was trying so hard to convince me I was being a good mom and trying so hard to pretend everything was okay - I had to leave."

Hen smiled at the other woman, gentle and kind as she promised, "I understand. I didn't when Chim first told me that Buck knew you'd left and didn't tell him. But I understand now."

The youngest member of Station 118 murmured a little around the vent, fighting a little bit as he

came awake and Maddie's attention diverted instantly. She got up and leaned over into Buck's eyeline, her hand steady on his cheek as she coaxed him to calm and stop fighting the vent. Buck watched her with fluttering eyes, soft whimpers slipping free around the tubing, his ventilator clicking as he tried to breathe for himself. "No, Evan," Maddie soothed, fingers of her free hand smoothing through his hair. "Remember? Let the vent do its job. I know it's scary, but you're all right. Just calm down, Ev."

Buck blinked a couple times, before his eyes fluttered in what Hen had come to recognize as understanding and agreement with his sister's entreaties. It took a moment, before the clicking stopped and the machine continued its same, slow rhythm. Buck's eyes fluttered a little bit, eyebrows furrowing a little as he continued to watch his sister in search of comfort. "That's good," she soothed. "You're doing so good, Evan. Just close your eyes, okay? I'm right here - I'm not leaving you. Okay? I promised."

Buck watched her for another long moment, before his eyes started to drift closed and all too soon, he'd fallen back under the influence of the drugs. His sister smiled at his slumbering features, bending over to press a kiss to his forehead and murmured, "Love you, little brother. Just rest."

It was probably a good thing Maddie had gotten distracted by her brother, as Hen's phone started vibrating in her pocket about then.

She pulled it free with a frown and then found herself scowling at the picture of Chimney on the screen. "Oh damn," she sighed, free hand coming up to smooth over her face before she swiped across the screen to answer the call. "Hey, Chim."

"She's not in Kansas City, Hen," Chim announced, without so much as a "hello" or a "how are you?" In fact, it had been a couple days since Chimney had had anything to say on their calls that didn't have something to do with the hunt for Maddie Buckley.

A Maddie Buckley who hadn't even looked over at her, too caught up in speaking quietly to her brother.

"I'm thinking of heading to St Louis, or do you think I should try Chicago next?" he asked, his tone rambling and clearly on the only track his mind was capable of following anymore.

Hen settled back in her chair, wondering how long it would take for her best friend to realize she hadn't said anything in awhile. Finally around the time he'd started talking about Massachusetts, she interrupted his rambling. "So am I expected to contribute to this conversation, Howard, or are you just going to keep talking? Because I'm in the ICU, and we're not really supposed to be on our phones in here."

Chimney stammered to a stop, startled by the question. "Wait - the ICU? Why are you at the ICU? Are you okay?"

"I am fine," she replied with a roll of her eyes. "Buck, however, is not."

The drastic turn around in Chim's tone really drove home the wedge this whole situation had driven into their little family. "Of course he's not," he snarked. "Did he get hurt on a call?"

"No," she replied, suddenly realizing how disappointed in her best friend she'd been since Buck's fall at the station. "He broke his zygoma bone, actually. Had to have surgery and is currently on a vent. We're trying not to leave him alone, so that he doesn't fight the vent when he wakes up."

"Broke his zygoma?" Chim echoed, sounding confused by the situation. "How did he do that?"

“Apparently, he took a fist to the face about two weeks ago. Didn’t let anyone know, because he didn’t want the person to get in trouble,” she replied, looking up to see Maddie watching her with a fierce expression. “Who do you think could have punched him, Chim? Surely none of us would have punched our little brother in the face like that.”

Through the phone she could hear Chimney sputtering a little as he processed that information. Hen knew Eddie had called him but she also knew Eddie’s voicemail hadn’t said a lot about what was going on. Smiling at Maddie, she couldn’t help the tone of her voice as she announced down the line, “You know, Chim? I have someone here who’s just dying to talk to you.”

Hen didn’t give Chim the time to argue with her, simply handing over the phone with a smile. Maddie accepted it with her free hand, the other still holding her brother’s, before she put the phone to her ear. You could have fried an egg on her tone, she sounded so hot under the collar, as she hissed down the line, “Howard Han, what the **hell** did you think you were doing?”

Even Hen could hear Chimney’s shocked, “Maddie!?” through the line, smirking a little bit as the reality of Maddie’s location started to register in Chim’s thoughts. Maddie gave him no time to talk, steamrolling forward without prejudice. “You punched my brother in the face? How could you do that?”

“You know about that?”

“You want to know **how** I know about that?” she countered hotly, “Bobby told me.” The other woman’s jaw tightened and her voice turned molten as she ordered, “You bring my daughter home to me, Howard Han, or so help me **GOD** . . . I will **never** forgive you.”

Maddie pulled the phone away from her ear and offered it back to Hen. Hen accepted the phone then watched as Maddie turned away and returned her full attention back onto her brother. Hen could hear Chimney pleading with Maddie through the phone and, having no interest in his sudden apologies, hung up.

Chimney would have a mess to deal with when he got back. Honestly, Hen felt pretty sure at this point the mess was nothing less than he deserved.

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It had been a long three days, with the only constant of Maddie Buckley’s days the unconscious form of her brother. Despite Bobby and Eddie’s desire to remain with Evan, they still had to work especially with being now two men down at the 118. So most of the time, Maddie sat in this cubicle alone with only her brother for company and the occasional visits by Evan’s doctor, a Dr Quinn Faerian whose eyes twinkled behind his frameless glasses and whose care of her brother proved impeccable. The doctor had indulged the former nurse more than once, the two collaborating seamlessly over her brother’s care.

As for her sweetheart brother, Evan woke only occasionally. Every time he woke, he woke up fighting the vent and confused about where he was. Maddie did her best to soothe him, calming him down and gentling him back under the influence of the drugs. Each instance caused her heart to surge into her throat, hating to see him so small and scared.

The sinus infection raged on, the antibiotics in his IV barely touching it despite all hopes to the contrary. The drain remained, sending the mucus dripping to his stomach instead of from his nose, and at the moment Dr Faerian didn’t seem to have any idea on when that might change. He definitely agreed with Maddie, however, that Evan would be in for a haul once the ventilator came out that afternoon.



Dr Faerian left it in for as long as he possibly could, trying to give Evan as much help as he could get as he slowly recovered from a week of inadequate sleep, little food and debilitating pain. Leaving it in for any longer, however, would do Evan more harm than good. So Maddie sat with him and held his hand, watching his face as she told him stories so she'd know the moment he woke from the sedative they'd weaned him off of starting the previous night.

It didn't seem possible, but eventually she ran out of stories and frowned as her brain trickled back to the night before. Bobby had sat down with her next to her brother's bedside and told her everything he knew about what had happened - everything Evan had told him and then everything Eddie had added later. Guilt and horror left Maddie's gut churning and more than once since she'd come to know the full details of what had happened to her brother, she wondered if she might puke. She swallowed those emotions down again, forcing a small smile at her brother's slack face as she set herself to apologizing again. "I am so sorry, Ev," she insisted, lifting his hand up to curve against her cheek. "Never in a million years did I think Howard would react the way he did. If I'd known, I never would have asked you to keep my secret, okay?"

As she considered what she'd said, she snorted softly. "Or maybe I would have, huh? Keeping secrets is how we Buckleys survive, isn't it? I kept Mom and Dad's secret about Daniel from you, even when I should have told you. I made Howard promise to keep it from you. I asked you to keep a secret from Howard." She sniffled softly, her head aching as she started to cry. "I'm so sorry, Evan. This is all my fault."

She tried to keep her sobs soft so as not to disturb the other patients in the ICU. The soft brush of a thumb against her cheek brought her head up to see her brother watching her through tired, but lucid eyes for the first time in entirely too long. She forced a smile through her tears, pressing his hand tighter to her face. "Hey you," she breathed, lifting her own hand to smooth along his jaw as lightly as she could.

His eyes slipped closed in a soundless flinch, before he returned his attention to her again. His free hand shifted from where it laid on his stomach, first two fingers flicking up and down in a tired wave. Relieved, Maddie pushed to her feet and reached across him to press against the call button for the nurses. Then she leaned over to press her forehead against Evan's own, her tears dripping onto his cheeks as she breathed, "Welcome back."

Evan's hand against her cheek tightened, holding her close even as his shoulders hitched in a soft sob. "It's okay," she promised, her lips shifting to press against his skin. "You're okay, Evan. You did so good. I'm so proud of you."

He nodded a little, unable to move much thanks to the tube down his throat, tears of his own carving diamond tracks down his cheeks. Maddie settled down on the mattress next to his hip, both of his hands held tightly within her own as she watched him look around the room and take it in for the first time. His eyes caught on the messy cot pressed back against the one wall, flicking over to her curiously. "Bobby's been spending the nights here," she replied to the silent question. "He's been really worried about you. They all had a shift today, though - he and Eddie will be upset they couldn't be here when you woke up, but they'll be back tonight."

One hand curved into a "C" shape and Maddie chuckled as she promised, "Chris is very anxious to see you. You're in ICU right now, though. They won't allow anyone under the age of twelve back here, so he hasn't seen you yet." She smiled to see the visible relief flash across his face at the information, amused and awed all over again over how much her brother loved his best friend's kid. She threaded her fingers through his hair as she promised, "Once we get that vent out today, the doctors are going to move you to a step-down unit, okay?"

Maddie's fingers smoothed through his hair, absently wondering where the nurses were, even as she reveled in the time she had with her brother now. "I'll call Eddie while they're removing the vent, I promise. I'm sure he'll bring Chris to see you tonight."

One of Evan's hands came up to brush against his throat, eyebrows furrowing. "Three days," she replied, a small twitch of smile around the tube clear indication she'd guessed right. "Your throat is going to be sore once it comes out, so they'll want you to restrict talking as much as you can."

Evan's chin bobbed a little bit in a meek nod, before his eyes slipped closed and he settled back against his pillows quietly. Maddie watched him, able to see the thoughts scrolling across the back of his eyelids as he tried to figure out how to ask his next question. It took a moment for Maddie to realize what might be worrying him like this and she smiled as she shifted to cuddle against his side. "It's okay, Evan. I know what happened."

Blue eyes snapped open and shot to her face, clearly cringing away as he tried to gauge her mood. "Not angry with you," she assured him gently. "I asked you for the impossible, Ev - and you delivered, just like you always do. I'm not mad, okay?"

His fingers shifted as he mimed writing and Maddie nodded. "I have a notepad for you, so you can communicate. Just rest for now, though, okay? We'll talk about it when the nurses get that tube out of your throat."

Just then the nurses came bustling in, prompting Maddie to stand from the mattress. Evan's grip on her fingers tightened as he stared at the flood of nurses, visibly frightened as they bustled around him like little worker bees. "It's okay," she promised, sketching tender circles against his temple. "I'm right here."

It took a bit for him to settle, but Dr Faerian came in by the time he'd relaxed enough not to be cringing anytime one of the nurses approached. The doctor reached out to touch Evan's shoulder kindly. "Good morning, Evan. I'm Dr. Faerian - welcome back."

Evan blinked at him, the action deliberate and clearly in reaction to the man's greeting. Dr. Faerian chuckled, hands moving gently as they checked Evan's jaw and throat then the side of his face. After a moment, he pulled his hands back and settled onto the mattress next to Evan's leg. "All right. Now, I'm sure you want that tube out of your mouth."

Evan nodded as much as he could, watching the man with imploring eyes. "I'm going to take it out, Evan, today . . . hell, right now. I promise. However before I do that, I need to make something very clear to you. The facial break is still in the process of healing, so when I ask you to cough while I pull the tubing clear, it's going to hurt. I am sorry for it, and in a perfect world, I'd leave the vent in until your face had healed. But at this point, you're already dealing with a nasty sinus infection and the longer we keep you on the vent, the longer we need to worry about the potential for pneumonia. It will be better for you to take it out, even though it's going to hurt. Do you understand?"

The vent clicked a little as Evan tried to swallow around it, before his chin bobbed a little bit in a nod. His fingers tightened around Maddie's, eyes flicking towards her for comfort, before returning back to the doctor at her reassuring nod. His free hand came up to knock up and down in a silent nod, despite the fear Maddie could still see in his features.

Dr. Faerian could see it too and smiled gently. "I'm going to go as quickly and as gently as I can, okay?" Hand coming to rest on Evan's shoulder, he squeezed gently. "Now, once the tube comes free, your mouth is still going to feel weird, okay? We completed the reconstruction of your face transorally."

The blank look on Evan's face prompted the man to stop and smile, explaining warmly, "Basically, we made an incision in the roof of your mouth and replaced the pieces of bone the trauma to your face had dislodged. However, because the mouth is a hot bed for bacteria, we also had to pack the wound pretty heavily with gauze. As tempting as it would be to play with the packing with your tongue, I have to ask you to leave it alone as much as you can. Can you do that for me?"

Evan nodded again, the gesture small and meek due to the tube down his throat. "God, you might be the easiest patient I'll ever have," the man teased, causing a soft blush to paint across Evan's cheeks as he shook his head and gave the man apologetic eyes. The man chuckled, teasing, "Oh, so we're only being good for the moment. Good to know."

Maddie chuckled as she promised, "He's not as bad as he thinks he is, but he'll probably make some of your nurses a little crazy."

"Fair enough," he laughed. "Everyone always does." Turning back to Maddie, he continued, "Last thing and then we'll get that tube loose. You have a secondary tube running down the back of your throat - you're going to feel it more after the vent comes free. I mentioned the sinus infection, right?"

Another meek nod.

"You cannot blow your nose, okay?" he insisted firmly. "There was damage to the orbital socket - the eye socket, in layman's terms - and if air gets into that socket, you could lose your vision in that eye if not both. Blowing your nose is a good way to get air in that socket, so we definitely don't want you to do that. Which is where the other tube comes from - it's draining your sinuses into your stomach as much as it can."

Maddie giggled a little bit as Evan still managed to make a disgusted face despite the tube down his throat, causing a grin and laugh as Dr. Faerian glanced at her warmly. "I know, it's gross, but it's better than the alternative. I promise."

Evan triggered the vent again as he took a deep breath in through his nose, Maddie's fingers smoothing along his hairline to soothe him as he assimilated all the information they were throwing at him. Fortunately, Dr. Faerian only smiled and squeezed Evan's shoulder warmly. "We can go over all of that again, if we need to. Right now, let's get that tube out of your throat, okay?"

Eagerness lit her brother's face and he nodded as much as he could, clearly excited by the prospect. Maddie lifted her brother's hand to her lips, pressing a kiss to his knuckles before laying it down next to him as she promised, "I'm going to call Eddie while they get it free, okay? I'll be standing in the doorway, okay? I won't be far away."

His pinky came up, already hooked and waiting, earning a smile from Maddie as she hooked her own with his. Then, using the hold, she lifted his hand to her mouth for one more fervent kiss to his hand. "You're the very best little brother ever, okay? Be brave for me, just a little longer."

He took another deep breath, the ventilator clicking erratically at the action, before he let her go and the nurses swarmed.

Pulling her phone from her pocket, Maddie dialed Eddie Diaz from memory, as she watched the nurses lay the bed flat and get everything ready. Dr. Faerian moved to the head of the bed, pulling gloves on, before tilting Evan's head back and pressing down on his chin gently.

Maddie could hear Evan's sob of pain at the action, flinching even as Eddie demanded in her ear,

“Maddie? What happened?”

“He’s awake,” she replied, desperate to comfort her brother as tears streamed down his cheeks.

“They’re pulling the vent now.”

“That’s good right?”

Maddie didn’t have time to answer, as Dr Faerian ordered gently, “Go ahead and take a deep breath for me, Evan. Then cough as hard as you can.”

Her fingers compressed down hard on the plastic, distantly aware of Eddie’s voice in her ear. Her brother managed the deep breath, but his cough broke off into a garbled scream as it torqued his already aching face. Fortunately the scream performed the same function as the cough and the tube came free in a whoosh, giving the entire room the full surround sound of Evan’s pained sobs.

“Just bring Chris. I’ll text you the room,” Maddie barked down the line, before the phone clattered against the table to her right and she rushed back to her brother’s side.

One hand pushed into his hair as the other cupped his jaw, stabilizing the joint even as he sobbed and gagged from the pain. “You’re all right,” she soothed, pulling him into her arms and cradling him against her. “You’re all right, Evan. I know it hurts, kiddo, but it’s over now. You’re all right.”

Her brother rolled over into her, burying his face into the divot of her abdomen, one arm flung across her waist as he sobbed through a tightly clenched jaw. “Hurts,” he slurred.

Maddie shushed him tenderly, resituating him deftly against her while Dr. Faerian worked to sit the bed up again. Then he gave an order to the nurse for a booster dose of morphine, sending the woman running from the cubicle. Maddie looked up at him with a relieved smile. “Thank you.”

“Of course.” He nodded at her, two fingers pressing a light touch to her shoulder before clearing his throat and shoving his hands into his pockets. “The morphine should help make him more comfortable. In the meantime, I’m going to get the transfer orders put in. I’ll be back when we’re ready to move him.”

Maddie pressed a kiss to her brother’s forehead as she assured the doctor, “I’m looking forward to it.” Her eyes widened a little bit as she realized how the statement could have been perceived, before blurting, “The move, I mean. We’re looking forward to the move. I mean, of course we are . . . it’s a little lonely here. Not that you haven’t been wonderful but . . .”

His smile widened a little bit at her flustered rambling, and Maddie could hear her jaw click as she shut herself up before she dug herself a further hole. Evan’s ribs shuddered a little against her as he fought between pain and laughter, and even Maddie could have sworn a small tinge of red clung to Dr. Faerian’s ears. “I’m glad to hear you have no complaints. I’ll get that transfer processed as soon as I can,” he assured her, before all but scrambling from the cubicle.

Once he was gone, Maddie pinched her brother’s ribs. “You shut up. You are not helping.”

Bless his heart, her brother only snorted softly, a tight, invisible smile glowing from his eyes as he teased her for her rambling.

The next hours were a little bit of a blur, Maddie soothing her brother’s tears over the renewed pain in his fractured face. She helped him dress in his own clothes - sweatpants and a worn-soft t-shirt, with socks around his nearly ice cube feet. Then Maddie held his hand all the way to the new room, her thumb smoothing against his skin as the orderlies wheeled his bed around. Staying out of the way as the orderlies got the bed into place and Evan hooked up to all the monitors, it took a

few minutes before the Buckley siblings were alone once again.

Evan looked worn out, eyes fluttering as he tried to stay awake. Leaning one hip against the edge of the bed, Maddie reached to cup his cheek gently, careful to keep her touch light so as not to hurt him. "Go to sleep, Ev," she soothed. "I'll let you know when Eddie gets here with Chris, okay?"

Seeing a tired smile in his eyes instead of the usually boisterous grin on his lips caused a throb of pain deep in her heart. As a former nurse, Maddie knew better than almost anyone what kind of haul Evan had ahead of him. Dr. Faerian had been insistent on the need to be diligent with the absence of the vent, and the two had talked briefly about changing Evan's antibiotic cocktail now that the risk of pneumonia had dropped with the removal from the vent.

Evan's battle had only just begun.

Fortunately, her brother had been struggling with exhaustion since the removal of the vent. Tack on the chaos of the transfer to the step down unit, as well as the excitement of maybe seeing Chris that evening? Her brother only had to close his eyes before he passed out.

She took a deep breath, one hand coming up to push back through her hair. No one had heard from Howard since his phone call to Hen three days before and every day Maddie didn't know the location of her daughter felt like torture. Bobby had been wonderful with Evan, giving Maddie the opportunity to shower and change every evening when he returned from his shift. Not to mention Eddie - he hadn't been able to be in the ICU as much as Bobby or Maddie, as Chris wasn't allowed in the unit, but he always brought them food and checked in to make sure they didn't need anything.

She jumped as a hand came to rest on her shoulder, spinning around to find Dr. Faerian standing there, hands up as he apologized. "Sorry. I didn't mean to startle you." One hand gestured back towards the door as he insisted, "I knocked, but you seemed lost in thought."

"I was," she agreed with a small smile. "I'm sorry. Did you need me?"

"Just checking on him now that he's transferred," he replied, eyes scanning over the monitors and connections, before turning to her. "And checking on you. You looked a little overwhelmed upstairs, when we removed the vent."

Maddie blushed a little bit, a frown trying to tug at her mouth despite a truly valiant attempt to smile. "I'm older than he is, by a lot," she replied with a shrug. "Our parents were . . . absent . . . a lot of the time, so I was responsible for him. I don't like to see him in pain."

"You must love him very much."

"Evan and Jee are definitely tied for number one in my heart," she replied, frowning a little bit at the sudden realization that she hadn't even thought about including Howard in that tally.

"Jee?"

"My daughter," she replied, her lips softening into a genuine smile. "She's with her father right now. With any luck, he'll have her home soon."

"Where did they go?"

She huffed out a soft sound. "It's complicated?" One hand pushed back through her hair again before she looked up at him with a meager smile. "Have you ever had a situation in your life when you don't know exactly how you got here, but you're not sure you would go back even if you

could?"

"Sometimes," he replied with a slow smile. "And your daughter's father? Is he . . . important? In your life?"

"He was," she replied with a nod, her eyes turning back to her brother's sleeping form. "Hell, if you'd asked me two weeks ago, I would have tallied him with Evan and Jee."

"What changed?"

"I found out he's the one responsible for all of this." She huffed out a soft breath. "He's the one who punched Evan and it was that punch which broke Evan's zygomatic bone."

"Oh. Well I can see how that would make things complicated."

She snorted. "Like you wouldn't believe."

The two stood silent for awhile, watching Evan sleep, before Maddie's ears clued in to the familiar sound of crutches thudding against the linoleum floor. She glanced down at her watch in surprise, startled to realize that it had gotten so late. Dr. Faerian smiled a little as he asked, "Someone you know?"

"Evan's best friend and his son," she replied with a grin. "Chris is under twelve, so they haven't seen each other since Evan was admitted."

"I hope Evan enjoys their visit then."

"It's Buck," she replied with a fond smile. Smiling sheepishly, she looked up at him and insisted, "I'm really the only one who calls him 'Evan'. Everyone else calls him 'Buck'."

"Duly noted," he replied with a gentle laugh. "Well then, I hope **Buck** enjoys their visit. And Ms Buckley . . .?"

"Maddie," she insisted with a smile.

He grinned at her, the very tips of his ears turning rosy as he continued, "And Maddie . . . please don't hesitate to let me know if there's anything you need, okay? Anything at all."

"Thank you, Dr. Faerian."

His cheeks flared as he corrected, "Quinn."

Maddie giggled a little. "Thank you, Quinn."

"You are very welcome, Maddie."

Exiting her brother's room, Maddie headed in the direction of the footsteps while Quinn turned the opposite way. "Hello Christopher," she greeted the ten year old, reaching out to ruffle his curls. "Fancy seeing you here."

"Hi, Tia Maddie!" he cheered brightly. "Can I see Bucky now?"

"He's sleeping," she replied. "But I know he's been very excited to see you, so I think it'll be okay if we wake him up."

Christopher beamed at her, before sobering, sweet mouth pulling downwards into a worried frown.

“Daddy says Bucky’s hurt badly.”

Maddie took a deep breath in through her nose, then let it out in a sigh. She knelt at his feet and reached up to touch his cheek, nodding. “He is, Chris. And his face really hurts, so it’s hard for him to smile. And he can’t really talk to you, okay?”

“He can’t?”

“He has a notepad,” she replied with a crooked smile, “so you two can communicate. But you’ll have to be patient with him, okay? He’s still really sleepy and his vision is still a little wonky from his injury.”

“It’s okay,” he replied with a sweet giggle. “Bucky’s handwriting is really terrible anyway.”

Maddie laughed out loud, wrapping her arms around him for a warm, fierce hug. “Yes it is, isn’t it?” Her fingers ruffled his curls fondly as she informed him in an exaggerated whisper, “I think you being here is gonna be really good for him.”

Christopher giggled. “I brought our favorite book, too!” he cheered, bouncing a little so that the bookbag on his back bounced with him. “I can read it to him!”

“That sounds like a great idea, kiddo,” Eddie agreed with a fond smile for his son. Looking up at Maddie, his features smoothed into something worried as he asked, “How is he?”

“He’s hurting,” she replied with a timid smile. “But being out of the ICU will be good for him, I think. He’ll get to see Chris, and it’s one more step towards getting out of here entirely.”

“What kind of meds do they have him on?”

“Morphine for the pain,” she replied the two following after Christopher, as the boy crutched as quickly as he could towards Evan’s private room, “as well as levaquin for the sinus infection.”

“That’s a pretty strong antibiotic,” Eddie reminded her with a frown. “Is it really that bad?”

“Dr Faerian is going to see how he does, but mostly the levaquin was prescribed as a preventative, so as to stave off the potential for pneumonia while he was on the vent.”

“His face?”

“The reconstruction is holding,” she replied, leaning against the door as the two adults watched Christopher crutch towards the bed. “As for the rest of it? It’s just a game of wait and see.”

The two fell silent as Christopher climbed up onto the bed, letting his crutches clatter to the floor as he cuddled up close to his Bucky. Then, the little boy reached out and gently patted Evan’s chest, coaxing gently, “Bucky? Are you awake?”

A soft whimper slipped free as Evan’s eyes fluttered open, eyebrows furrowing at the sight of Eddie and Maddie in the doorway, before the sensation of a body next to him registered and he looked down. Maddie nearly burst into tears at the way her brother’s features softened into adoration at the sight of Christopher snuggled up next to him, one arm lifting to wrap around him and curl him closer. Clearly keeping in mind Maddie’s warning, Chris reached up to pat Evan’s face carefully as he assured him seriously, “I know you can’t talk, Bucky; that’s okay. I brought our favorite book, though! I can read it to you!”

Evan’s eyes glowed with his smile, his mouth flinching when his lips attempted to twitch into a

smile. Tears glittered in the corners of his eyes as his chin dipped into a single nod. “Yay!” Christopher cheered, reaching over to grab his bag and rummaging inside for the book Evan would read to Chris when he babysat on the nights Eddie took an extra shift. Christopher wiggled closer to Evan, pulling the book open and laying it across both of their laps. His features were alight with adoration as he looked up into Evan’s face, asking, “Can you see the pictures okay?”

He nodded, eyes searching Christopher’s face before turning towards the page again. Christopher nodded, understanding the unspoken cue easily and then began to read aloud.

Content that Evan would be alright without her for a time, Maddie pulled Eddie backwards, into the hallway and away from the door. Eddie smiled at her, tone gentle as he insisted, “He looks good.”

“Looks better than he did, for sure,” she agreed with a fond smile. “Thank you for bringing Chris - Evan’s missed him like crazy.”

“The feeling was mutual,” Eddie agreed through laughter. One hand came up to rest on her shoulder as he insisted, “Have you heard from Chim? About Jee?”

“No,” she replied, frowning fiercely. “He better get her home soon, though. We’re not **that** far from Kansas City.”

“He probably had to stop for Jee,” Eddie mentioned gently, hand on her shoulder. “It’s different traveling with a kid.”

She huffed, “Which is a whole other thing entirely. Why on Earth did he take her with him? Even if I **had** run away, he could never have known where I went or how long he would need to be gone! Jee should be learning to crawl right now! Experiencing tummy time and learning to hold herself up on her feet while holding someone’s hands. Not . . .” here she trailed off, her mouth twisting angrily, “. . . strapped in a carseat in the back of his crossover for months at a time.”

“I’m sure he had his reasons.”

“If he wouldn’t leave her with Evan, then the Lees would have been more than happy to look after her for him. He would have only needed to ask them,” she protested through tears. “Whatever his reasons, they removed Jee’s needs from being his number one priority. I don’t know if I can forgive that, Eddie.” Her hands came up to scrub over her face. “When I left, it was because Jee’s safety was all that mattered to me. How could he just ignore Jee’s safety for the sake of his own feelings?”

Just then, Maddie stiffened at the sound of a familiar voice calling her name. Eddie looked over her shoulder, his features contorting furious as he hissed out, “Chim.”

She sighed. “Fuck.”

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It had been four days since Eddie left the message on Chimney’s voicemail, but the rage he felt when he left it had not abated at all. The sight of him now, striding towards them with a giggly Jee in his arms, only fanned the flames higher. Eddie could hear the slow, steady growl in the back of his throat, as the older man approached and Eddie opened his mouth to tell him off as he came within arm’s reach.

Only to find himself with an armful of giggling six month old, as Maddie plucked her daughter



from Chim and deposited her in Eddie's arms. "Here you go, sweet girl," Maddie cooed to her daughter, ignoring her boyfriend completely. "You go with Tio Eddie, okay? Mommy and Daddy need to have a talk."

Contrary to popular belief, Eddie was not in fact stupid. He had sisters, and he could recognize this particular tactic from a mile away. *Hey, you look pissed. Have a baby.* Adriana and Sophia had used it against him with his nieces or nephews more than a few times right after his discharge from the service. They knew as well as Eddie did that he'd never lose his cool around the innocent.

And currently no one in this entire situation was more innocent than Jee-Yun Buckley Han.

Still, Eddie wouldn't just give in without a fight, his tone scolding as he insisted, "Maddie . . ."

"I just know Uncle Buck has missed his niece a whole lot, Tio Eddie," Maddie insisted with a pleading look. "I know he'd really appreciate it if you took Jee to see him."

He gave her a look at being neatly roped into obeying orders, before sighing. "You owe me," he insisted, bouncing Jee a little more comfortably into his arms before turning on his heel and leaving the couple alone behind him.

He barely made it through the door, before the sound of the two arguing followed him in. Buck looked up from Chris and his book at the sound of his sister's strident shouting, eyebrows furrowed worriedly. An expression Eddie was determined to erase, kicking the door shut behind him and muffling the sound of their arguing with prejudice. "Hey, Jee," Eddie insisted, shifting the baby around so she could see her uncle, "look who that is?"

Jee's whole demeanor lit up at the sight of Buck, her happy baby giggles turning into a delight squeal, little legs kicking and her hands grabbing for Buck happily as she started babbling in her sweet baby talk to her uncle. Buck forced himself to smile, tears gathering in the corners of his eyes at the pain as he reached out his free arm to take her. "Easy, man," Eddie scolded gently, helping his best friend situate his niece against his chest, "don't hurt yourself, okay? She loves you - she won't be upset if you can't smile at her."

Buck nodded, already ignoring Eddie in favor of bowing forward to rest his forehead against Jee's. The little girl giggled happily, her little hands coming up to cradle her uncle's face, her sweet voice babbling along as she no doubt told her uncle all about her adventures. "You good?" Eddie asked, pinning Buck in place seriously.

His chin dipped in a nod, eyes fixated on her as he took her in as though it had been a year since he'd seen her and not two weeks. Eddie could feel his anger at Chim rise once more. First the cruelty of Chim's threat during the blackout, when he threatened to keep Jee from Buck if he didn't get what he wanted. Then taking her on a wild goose chase across the country, and leaving her uncle behind to worry about her. Seeing them now, it was clear to Eddie at least that there wasn't much Buck wouldn't do for Jee, up to and including injuring himself for her sake.

"Oh shoot," Eddie fussed, conscious not to cuss in front of the kids, "I don't have the diaper bag. You good if I go get it?"

Eddie's best friend looked up at him with wide eyes, before his eyes softened and he nodded silently. Eddie smirked a little bit, unable to resist teasing his best friend. "You know, you can't talk, but you sure do manage to get your point across."

One corner of Buck's lips twitched upwards for the briefest of moments - if Eddie hadn't been looking for it, he never would have seen it at all. Eddie reached out to ruffle his son's hair, ordering

fondly, “You keep an eye on Bucky and Jee for me and Tia Maddie, okay?”

“Yes, Daddy,” he agreed with a brilliantly beaming grin.

“Thanks, Superman,” he insisted, pressing a kiss to his son’s head before leaving the room again, conscious to shut the door behind him.

Maddie and Chimney stood nearly toe to toe, Chimney’s features twisted as he yelled, “You just **left**, Maddie! What the hell was I supposed to think!? I thought you were in trouble!”

“I left you a video, Howard!” she shot back hotly, hands clenched at her sides furiously. “I **told** you that I was all right, and that I loved you. **You** were the one who completely ignored me in favor of doing whatever the hell you wanted, again.”

“Again!?” he demanded. “What the hell does **that** mean?”

“You did not listen to me!” Maddie took a deep breath in through her nose. “I asked for time, and instead of giving me the time I **needed** so I could come home to you and to Jee? You bundled our six month old daughter into a car seat, for an uncertain amount of time, and took off into the unknown. You took her away from everyone who loved her, because you were so convinced you knew what I needed better than I did!”

“You were sick, Maddie!”

Maddie was clearly having none of it as she shot back. “And I went to get help!” She snorted, the sound derisive and angry as she snarled, “I didn’t even leave the city, Howard!”

“How was I supposed to know that? You didn’t tell me anything! And Buck wouldn’t either!”

As though Chim had flipped a switch, Maddie’s whole body exploded into fury, “Because Evan didn’t know!! I didn’t fucking tell him!”

Chimney faltered, staring at her in shock. “You what?”

Maddie’s nose curled, her anger visible in her face as she repeated, “I didn’t tell Evan where I was going, Howard. I didn’t want to have to force Evan to lie to you.”

“Well how was I supposed to know that?” he shot at her furiously.

Eddie found himself stepping between the two as Maddie’s whole face twisted at the question. Maddie stood at his back as he watched Chim over crossed arms and a fierce glower. Maddie’s hand touched Eddie’s shoulder, guiding him a little to the side so she could see him. She sounded more disappointed than angry as she whispered, “How can you ask me that?”

“It’s a legitimate question, Maddie?” he asked, jaw hardening. “I think Buck has more than proved he can’t be trusted to be reliable. God, all the girls he picked up that first year.”

“Did you hear what you just said?” Maddie demanded. “That ‘first year’? Was four years ago, Howard. And in all that time, you have put him down, made him the butt of all your jokes, and treated him like he’s a second class citizen compared to you.” Eddie could hear the way she swallowed hard, anguish stark in her voice as she whispered, “And I let you. I didn’t once say anything, because I thought it was something playful between you . . . a game. And now I am suddenly seeing it all in a very different light.”

Chimney softened, reaching for her arm as he murmured, “Maddie . . .”

Maddie jerked back out of reach and Eddie took that as his cue to step between them again, knocking Chim's hand aside. Eddie could hear the emotion twisting her voice as Maddie insisted, "You need to go, Howard. I can't even look at you right now."

"But Jee . . ."

"Jee's my daughter," Maddie replied sharply, tone hardening. "She's safe with Evan and I. You need to go."

"You can't expect me to leave her here with you, Maddie," Chimney retorted, tone cold and cruel. "You left because you were a danger to her."

"I left because I **believed** I was a danger to her," she countered. "I wasn't. But you? Taking her with you was unbelievably irresponsible, Howard. You set her development back, caging her in a car seat instead of allowing her to stay where she could continue to learn and grow. Of the two of us, I'm pretty sure I'm the most responsible right now."

"Is everything all right over here?" a voice asked from the hallway to their left, pulling their attention to the sight of a doctor in a lab coat striding towards them. The man's own attention seemed to be primarily on Maddie, though his eyes swept across the rest of the group curiously. "Ms Buckley? Is Evan . . . I mean, Buck . . . all right?"

"Yes, Dr Faerian, Evan's feeling much better now that he has his kids," she replied with a meager smile. Turning expressionless eyes back on Chimney, she insisted coldly, "As for the rest, Mr Han was just leaving."

One of the doctor's eyebrows cocked upwards as Chimney moved to protest, the man's tone conversational but implacable as he asked, "Do I need to have security come up to make sure of that?"

"No," she replied with a small frown. "I'm sure Mr Han can recognize the right thing to do and go without needing to be escorted."

"This isn't over, Maddie," Chimney shot at her.

Maddie's features cracked, sadness etched in every line of her face as she insisted, "It is over, Howard. We are over. Once Evan's been released from the hospital, we'll meet to discuss how we're going to work out custody of Jee. But until then, Jee will be safe with me and you need to leave." She shook her head when Chimney moved to protest, tone hardening as she ordered, "Do **not** make this harder than it needs to be, Howard. Just go."

Maddie turned on her heel and stormed back towards Buck's room. Eddie reached out and stripped the diaper bag from Chimney's shoulder deftly, pulling it over his own shoulder as he insisted, "You heard the woman, Chim. Get out. Or I'm pretty sure the good doctor here **will** call security to have you shown the door."

The doctor cocked an eyebrow, clearly waiting to see what the other man's reaction would be. Fortunately, Chimney apparently decided that discretion was the better part of valor and turned on his heel to go. Standing shoulder to shoulder with him, Eddie watched his coworker - and quite possibly former friend, since he didn't think he'd be able to forgive Chim for any of this - head towards the door. "So, that would be the father, then," the doctor mused absently, hands in his pockets as he watched Chimney disappear from sight.

"That would be him," Eddie replied with a sigh. One hand pushed back through his hair before he

turned narrowed eyes on him. “And you are?”

“Quinn Faerian,” the man replied, offering a hand. “I’m Evan’s doctor. Maddie . . . I mean, Ms Buckley and I have been discussing his treatment a lot over the last few days.”

“Right,” he drawled, a touch of his Texan accent clinging to the words as he considered the man. “Look, Buck’s my best friend, which basically makes Maddie the aunt of my kid. I absolutely will threaten you, if I need to. Got it?”

“Got it.”

“Good,” he agreed, still watching the man with a frown, before pivoting on his heel and turning back for Buck’s room. “Well come on, already. I’m assuming you came all the way over here to check on Buck, and not just rescue Maddie from Chim.”

“Chim?”

“Long story . . .” Eddie groaned, leading the way into the room.

\*\_\*\_\*\_\*\_\*

Buck’s hatred of Cedars-Sinai - and hospitals in general - might as well be legendary by this point. Every time he got admitted, the rush to get the hell out again competed with every other sensation. This time, though - God, Buck was **tired**. His face hurt and he couldn’t even smile at his niece because it hurt so bad Buck just wanted to cry.

Granted, the presence of Jee and Chris made everything a little better. Chris continued to read from their favorite book, and Jee giggled as Buck tickled her little toes. Every part of him hurt, but these two beautiful children made all of it worth it. Through the door, Buck could hear the shouting, easily able to identify his sister’s voice and also Chimney’s. Fortunately, the closed door made it difficult to understand the words they shouted at each other, but Buck had a terrible feeling his sister’s relationship had just taken a turn for the unrecoverable.

And, once again, it was all his fault.

He let his eyes slip closed, humming deep in his chest as Jee yawned widely, her sweet little fists rubbing at her eyes as her babbling softened. The six month old settled more comfortably against his chest, her hands fisting in the fabric of his t-shirt. The hardest thing Buck had ever done was swallow down the words he wanted to whisper to her, to ease her to sleep. All he could do was smooth his hand up and down her back as he continued to hum.

Even Chris seemed to be tiring beside him, the words getting farther and farther apart as he cuddled closer to Buck. The arm Buck still had around his shoulder reached a little further to flip the cover closed, then pulled Chris closer. “Love you, Bucky,” the little boy whispered.

Buck forced a pained smile, trying not to move his jaw as he whispered, “Love you too, kiddo. Get some rest, okay?”

“Don’t talk, Bucky,” Chris scolded with a sleepy frown. “You have to get better really soon, and that means no talking.”

Features smoothing affectionately, Buck bent his head to press a kiss into Chris’ curls, before nodding against his temple. He gave the boy a thumbs up in agreement, before lifting the hand to his hair and smoothing it back. Buck let his breathing slow to something calm and steady, easing both children further into the Land of Nod and inadvertently sending himself drifting as well.

He fought to stay awake, though, the sounds of shouting and the continued absence of Eddie clear indication that something big was happening outside. As exhausted as he was, Buck didn't want to sleep until he'd seen his sister again and had some idea of what had happened.

The gentle touch of familiar fingers to his cheek pulled him out of his doze and he looked up to find Maddie smiling at him sweetly. She bent to kiss first his cheek, then the top of Jee's head, teasing him gently, "I think we can confirm the award for 'Best Uncle Ever' now. You got her to fall asleep without even being able to speak."

He chuckled a little, careful to keep the sound deep in his chest and away from his face. Then, moving reluctantly, he started to uncurl his arm from Jee in a silent offer for his sister to take her daughter back. Maddie only shook her head, tucking his arm back around her as she insisted, "No, Ev - Jee's in the safest arms she could be right now. She's fine right where she is. Just let her sleep."

Pride and joy swelled through Buck, relieved to know his sister trusted him with her daughter when Chim had made no bones about the fact he didn't believe Buck to be responsible enough to care for Jee alone. Buck tightened his arm around his niece, anchoring her more firmly against his chest and burying his lips into the lavender scented strands of her hair.

Maddie slumped into the chair next to his bed with a groan, earning a frown from Buck. He let out a soft grunt, pulling her attention to him. His face contorted with concern as he glanced towards the door, down at Jee, then back to Maddie. His sister smiled at him sadly, as she informed him gently, "It's over, Ev. I ended it."

"Mads," he whispered, flinching away from the action.

"No, Evan," she interrupted, her head shaking firmly. "I can forgive a lot of things, but I have only just realized there are things about Howard I can't forgive."

"You didn't see how upset he was," he whispered, trying not to move his jaw. "I betrayed him, Mads. I absolutely had it coming."

"Evan Buckley, are you seriously trying to tell me you deserved this?!" his sister demanded incredulously.

"I mean, didn't I?" Despite how much it hurt to talk, Buck insisted, "I definitely deserved it, Mads."

"You did not," she replied with a shake of her head. "Hell, if you want to go down that road, some people might say I betrayed Doug by leaving him. Does that mean I deserved what he did to me?"

Buck's eyes widened, horror causing him to burst out, "No!" He bit down on the cry as the pain swelled through his face. He hiccuped through tears as he tried to control his breathing so he wouldn't wake the children, eyes slipping closed as he forced himself to calm. Still, once the burning in his jaw had lessened, he repeated soundlessly, "No."

"If I didn't deserve what Doug did to me, Evan," she insisted kindly, reaching out to squeeze his wrist gently, "then you didn't deserve to get punched by Howard either."

Eddie sounded upset as he spoke from near the door. "Wait, was that in question?"

"Apparently," she replied.

"Buck, come on, man," his best friend groaned, coming to sit on the armrest of Maddie's chair.

“You didn’t deserve this.”

“Agree to disagree,” he whispered with a meager smile.

“Okay,” Maddie replied with a grin. “Just means you’ll have to give us the chance to change your mind.”

Dr Faerian spoke up from where he stood in the doorframe, eyes sparkling as he joked, “Why do I get the feeling that that’s not as easy as you make it sound?”

Eddie and Maddie exchanged a conspiratorial look between them, even as Buck fought the urge to roll his eyes, knowing it would hurt like a bitch.

Still, Buck recognized the look on the man’s face when he kept glancing towards Maddie. The hand around Chris lifted to point one finger at the doctor, cocking his eyebrow at his sister. The blush on her cheeks proved answer enough and Buck turned narrowed eyes on the man. He glanced down to make sure Jee was completely out, before lifting the hand and stabbing a finger at his sister with a fierce glare at the man, before gesturing between him and Eddie, then stabbing his finger at the doctor last of all.

Maddie giggled, her tone teasing as she joked, “I hope you know that I can translate that.”

Buck cocked an eyebrow at her, gesturing towards him in a clear request for her to do just that. Dr. Faerian chuckled, tone curious as he asked, “Okay, so would you mind? Cause I’ll confess to being a little confused.”

“That’s my sister, asshole,” Maddie recited. “You mess with her, and we’re going to destroy you. Got it?”

“You got all of that, from some finger pointing?”

Eddie chuckled, assuring the doctor, “It’s a Buckley sibling thing. You’ll get used to it.”

“And if I don’t?”

“You saw what happened to the last man who didn’t,” Maddie chirped with a brittle grin and all the fierceness of a mother lioness guarding her cubs.

“Duly noted,” he replied with a solemn nod. “Well, I certainly don’t want to end up like that guy, for sure.”

“Good call,” Eddie drawled with a wicked grin.

Despite the pain the expression sparked in his jaw, Buck allowed himself to smirk at the man and resolved to keep a close eye on Quinn Faerian. Somehow he had a feeling things were about to get interesting.

Let the games begin.

# Fissures

## Chapter Summary

The definitions of "Fissure" are wide and varied as a fissure can be any of the following:

- a narrow opening or crack of considerable length and depth usually occurring from some breaking or parting a fissure in the earth's crust
- a natural cleft between body parts or in the substance of an organ or a break/slit in tissue, usually at the junction of skin and mucous membrane

Or

- a separation or disagreement in thought or viewpoint : SCHISM

All of these definitions apply to the trauma happening to Buck's family. He'd really just like it to stop.

## Chapter Notes

Welp, it's not done at 3, so it's probably gonna be five. Oh dear. (I'm told this isn't a problem. I guess we'll see. <3)

I hope you enjoy this! It's been such a fun fic to work on and the response from all of you has been amazing. Thank you for being so supportive.

I can't wait to hear what you think and enjoy!



Maddie sighed at the fierce look on her brother's face as he stabbed a finger into the notepad he held in his other. Scrawled on the page - in huge and painstakingly written letters, just so Maddie couldn't pretend not to read them - were the words **GO HOME**. The number of exclamation points might actually be excessive, but she could understand it too. Evan had been in the hospital for a week and a half now, fighting a nasty sinus infection that only exacerbated the broken bone in his face.

The pain had started to resolve enough that he could speak, short sentences or single word answers, but for the most part Evan scribbled out his needs on the pad. Her brother seemed determined to remain absolutely silent, if that would be what it took for his zygoma to heal. The coughing and hacking from the infection was causing enough problems, without him chattering away too.

Absently, Maddie made a mental note to murder Quinn.

Quinn - Dr Faerian - had told Evan yesterday he could go home, but he'd need around the clock care until either the sinus infection cleared up or the break healed. Evan had been on a mission to convince his sister ever since. She sank down on the edge of the mattress, glancing towards Jee who slept comfortably in the bassinet the hospital had provided them. "Ev," she sighed, one hand coming up to push back through her hair, "I know you want to go home. But go home where? I can't go back home - not with the way things are with Howard."

Evan flicked over the page on his pad and scribbled furiously, before shoving it at her. *Come home*



*with me.*

“You don’t have the room for us both, Evan,” she reminded him kindly. “You have one bedroom, only one full bathroom, and stairs. You saw Jee; she’s scooting all over the place and the stairs could be really dangerous for her if she managed to tumble down them if we had her upstairs. I don’t have a baby gate, and even if I did have one, your stairwell doesn’t support the use of one anyway.”

Evan slumped backwards with a soft huff, eyebrows lowered furiously over his eyes as he glowered at her. Maddie reached out to curve her hand around his cheek. “I know you want out of here. I do too,” she promised with a rueful chuckle. “But I don’t know where to go if you’re not here. And then there’s the treatment center to think about.” She smoothed her thumb over his cheek and promised, “I’m working on it, okay?”

Her brother blew out a breath, before scribbling on the notepad and showing it to her, *Eddie?*

“I like Eddie,” she replied through laughter, “but I’m not sure I want to live with him. Not to mention, he only has the space for one of us on his couch. And if I have to go back to the treatment center . . . you and Jee both need care, Evan. You heard Quinn the same as me.”

Maddie giggled as she watched her brother physically restrain himself from the urge to roll his eyes at her. Another aspect of communication her brother had always relied on, that was not currently available to him. *I’m fine*, he scribbled, slashing multiple lines under the declaration.

Granted, Maddie didn’t even need to protest that, because at that exact moment a coughing fit hit Evan like a fist to the solar plexus. The notepad fell from nerveless fingers as he hunched over, soft sobs slipping free among the coughing as the harsh hacking jarred the still healing bones in his face. Maddie shifted to sit next to him, one arm around his shoulders as the other lifted to brace his jaw closed. Evan’s hand came up to press her hand into his face, both of them very aware of the kind of damage the fit could be doing to the reconstruction and both trying to mitigate it as much as they could.

After a moment, the coughing fit eased and Evan slumped over into her, breathing hard through agonized keens. “I know,” she murmured, her hand moving to his hair in an effort to soothe him. Burying her lips into his hair, she whispered furiously, “God, I’m gonna kill him.”

He shook his head against her, a soft whimper slipping free as he whispered, “No.”

“This is one of those times, Evan, where your protests are going to fall on deaf ears,” she warned him. “He’s a paramedic - he should know better. Furthermore, what did he think my reaction to finding out he punched you was going to be? He can’t have thought I’d just . . . be okay with it.”

A soft knock against the door brought Maddie’s head around and she nearly sobbed with relief to see Captain Bobby Nash standing there. “Hey,” he greeted them both, dropping a bag of food on the chair along with his coat, before coming to the edge of the bed, “everything okay?”

“Coughing fit,” she explained, still smoothing her hands through his hair.

“Ah,” he replied, touch gentle as he reached out to massage Evan’s aching jaw the way only he seemed able to do. “God, kiddo, I’m so sorry this is happening to you.”

Evan moaned through clenched teeth, breaths rough and shaky even as he leaned into the touch. Jee started to rustle in her bassinet and Maddie looked up at the man, asking, “Can you get her for me?”

“How about I take him and you grab her?” he offered instead, one hand on her shoulder. “Cuddle your daughter a little bit while the three of us talk.”

“Ev?” she asked, looking down at him curiously.

Evan nodded, shifting to let her up. Bobby offered her a hand off the bed, before taking her seat on the mattress next to Evan, pulling the younger firefighter against him while still massaging his face. Maddie smiled, then bolted to grab up Jee before her little girl could start screaming her disapproval to the entire room about being ignored. It was the work of only a few minutes to get Jee into a clean diaper, and wrestle out a teething ring for her, letting her daughter chomp on it to soothe her as Maddie sank into the seat next to the bed. “I didn’t expect to see you today, Bobby,” Maddie prompted with a smile.

“Ran into Dr. Faerian yesterday, as I was leaving, and he told me Buck could go home as long as he had round the clock care,” he explained with a gentle smile. “So I went home and had a long talk with my amazing wife.”

Maddie frowned, tone curious but hesitant as she asked, “Okay? About what?”

“May’s got her own place now,” Bobby replied. “Which gives us two spare rooms. Two spare rooms that Athena and I would both like you to consider coming to stay in while Buck is still healing. It gives you two the time to discuss your options and figure out where you want to go from here.”

“Bobby,” she breathed, more than a little awed. “We can’t ask you to do that.”

“You’re not asking,” he reminded her with a smile. “Actually, Athena and I are pretty much insisting. Athena’s already getting a baby gate from the store so that we can block off the stairs from Jee and putting new sheets on the beds. We both want you there, because we love you both very much.”

Maddie promised never to mention the paternal adoration on Bobby’s face as he looked down at Evan with a small smile. “What do you think, kid?”

Evan’s fingers shook only a little bit as he flicked back through his notepad until the first page appeared again. *GO HOME* blared from the page at Bobby and earned soft laughter from the man. “All right, well we know Buck’s opinion. What do you think, Maddie?”

“And you really don’t mind?”

“Not in the slightest,” he replied gently, roughing up Evan’s hair fondly. “It’ll be good to have you both around. Athena’s already been itching at having Buck out of her reach to fuss over.” He winked at Maddie and earned a giggle as he promised, “Honest to God, Maddie, you’ll be doing me a favor. Two adults cannot be expected to eat all of the food she’s making these days.”

His eyes softened as he turned his attention down to Jee, tone going as soft as his expression as he insisted, “And it’ll be nice to have Ms Jee around all the time too.”

Evan’s hands flicked through pages, before he started scrawling, *She’s starting to crawl now.*

“That’s great!” the fire captain announced with a beaming grin. “That’s one of the most fun times you can experience with her. And you both should get that chance.”

Maddie nodded, free hand lifting to run back through her hair. “I’ll have to tell the treatment center.”

“Will you need to go back for a little while?” Bobby asked with a smile. “Because we will absolutely take Jee for a bit. I have plenty of vacation time saved up, so I can watch these two until you’re officially released.”

“Probably,” she replied with a frown. “They only agreed to let me stay because it was a hospital, and I had access to medical professionals if I needed it. If we’re leaving . . .”

Bobby nodded for a moment, before slipping from the bed and bending down to take Jee. “How about we let Buck watch his niece for a bit, while you call the treatment center to find out what their thoughts are and I find Dr Faerian to get the discharge paperwork started?”

Evan brightened at the prospect of having his niece, hands out and open to take her from Bobby as the man turned to lower the giggly child into his arms. Her brother curled up onto his side, one arm tight around her while the fingers of the other taunted Jee with tickles and earned piercing squeals of laughter. Bobby scruffed Evan’s hair again and then moved to put his hand on Maddie’s back gently, promising, “They’ll be all right for a bit. Let’s get what we need to do done, so we can focus on getting you both out of here and home.”

She nodded her agreement, leaving her hearts behind as she moved to the door with him. Even after they left the room, Maddie could still hear the delighted laughter from her daughter as they both walked away. Her brother was so good with Jee and a new bubble of anger swelled up into Maddie at the knowledge that Howard hadn’t just left Jee with her brother, when he made the decision to run off in search of her.

The two found Dr Faerian quickly, the man standing at the nurse’s station, signing off on charts and orders. “Quinn!” she called, jogging towards the station.

He looked up, eyes sparkling behind his glasses even as he smiled at her. “Hello, Maddie.” He winked, teasing, “Fancy seeing you here.”

She chuckled, gesturing to Bobby with a grin. “You remember Evan’s boss, Bobby Nash?”

“I do,” he agreed, one hand out to shake the older man’s hand. Then both hands found their way into his pockets as he looked between them and asked, “What’s up?”

“Bobby has been very kind to offer us the opportunity to stay at his place while Evan’s healing.”

“That’s great!” he announced with a grin. “I know you were worried about that.” After a moment, he frowned, “What about the treatment center?”

“Calling them now,” she replied with a meager smile. “We’ll see what they say.”

“If you need a letter or something from the medical professionals here, just let me know, okay?”

“Thank you, Quinn.”

Maddie could feel her cheeks growing warm as the blush on Quinn’s cheeks reddened, both of them looking away and earning soft chuckles from Bobby. She reached up to tug on her ear, before gesturing towards the doors. “I’m gonna go call the center.” Looking up at Bobby, she asked, “Can you take care of this for me?”

“Absolutely,” he agreed with a warm smile and a squeeze to her shoulder. “You do what you need to do. I’ll meet you back at Buck’s room when everything’s taken care of.”

She nodded her agreement, before jogging towards the doors leading from the hospital, fumbling

for her phone in her pocket and very conscious of the eyes of both men following her out.

\*\_\*\_\*\_\*

Howard Han did not really know how this happened.

Well, that's not entirely true - he **did**! He just didn't know how a punch to the face ended his relationship with his girlfriend. And okay, yes, the person he punched was said girlfriend's brother, but Buck had **lied** to him. Worse - Buck kept a secret from Chim about Maddie!

Maddie, who was struggling and who had run off alone after leaving their daughter at the 118 and with only a video for a note.

Buck, who had elected to keep the fact that he knew Maddie was leaving from Chim for a **week** before Chim found out. Not only found out, but found out because of a bill from the emergency room.

Chimney did not understand how on earth anyone could possibly side with Buck, after what he'd done! He should have told Chimney right away that Maddie had taken off! He should have . . . Maddie wasn't safe alone. She needed him.

. . . or at least, he thought she did.

After a week of fumbling around the empty apartment, moping and drinking and tripping over Jee's things that he hadn't put away before they left, Chimney had come to a simple conclusion. All of this was just a gut reaction to Maddie finding out Chimney had punched Buck. If he had the opportunity to get her alone - the opportunity to **explain** - surely everything would be all right and they could try to fix things between them. It was with this in mind that Chimney found himself back at the hospital, stopping into the gift shop for a bouquet of flowers for his girlfriend and a small teddy bear for Jee. Then, he asked someone at the front desk for Buck's room.

Rehearsing what he'd say, he came into Buck's room and slammed to a stop at the sight before him. Jee was crawling around on the mattress next to her uncle, who watched her with tired eyes and a hand around her ankle. And no other supervision.

Needless to say, the flowers hit the floor and Chim shouted, "What the fuck are you doing, Buck!? You can't let her crawl around on the mattress."

Buck flinched at the shout, pulling Jee instantly into his arms, which meant Chim ended up grabbing onto blankets and not his daughter when he lunged to grab her. Jee screamed, angry and sad and clinging to Buck even as Chimney reached for her frantically, tone strident as he tried to soothe her at the same time he scolded Buck fiercely for not taking care of her. Only the sharp yank of a hand on his shoulder prevented him from not ripping his daughter from her uncle, stumbling backwards to find Bobby slotting himself between the two. "Chimney, that's enough," he barked, eyebrows furrowed and a fierce frown on his face. "You're upsetting Jee."

"He was letting her crawl!" Chimney shot back, one finger stabbing in the younger man's direction. "On the bed! She could have fallen! She could have gotten hurt! Where the **hell** is Maddie? Why did she leave Jee alone with him?"

"That's enough!" Bobby barked, grabbing Chim's shoulder and shoving him towards the door firmly. "Get out!"

"But Bobby!"

“Now,” he ordered, shoving him through the door frame and jamming a finger into his face. “Stay here while I get them calmed down and I’ll be back.”

“Bobby . . .” Chimney protested, moving back towards the door.

“Stay, Howard!”

Whatever else Chimney might have said got lost as the door slammed in his face, leaving him alone outside the doors and his gifts for Maddie and Jee crumpled on the floor at his feet. “Fuck.”

He could hear Jee’s sobbing screams from the inside of the room, and Bobby’s soothing murmurs. From Buck he could hear nothing, causing his jaw to tighten angrily. Once again, this was all Buck’s fault, and he wasn’t even doing anything to soothe Jee. From behind him, he could hear footsteps, before Maddie demanded, “Howard? What are you doing here?”

Turning to face her, he looked up just in time to see her register the sound of their daughter’s cries. “What did you do to Jee?!” she snapped, bolting forward towards the door.

“What did I do?” he echoed incredulously. “What about what **Buck** did!”

Maddie stared at him in no little shock. “What do you mean, what Buck did?”

“He was letting her crawl around on the mattress, Maddie! She could have fallen off!”

One hand came up to stall his recounting of her brother’s crimes, her features set firmly as she demanded, “Was he asleep?”

Here Chimney faltered, frowning fiercely as he replied, “Well, no.”

“Was she out of arm’s reach?”

“No.”

“Then why the hell wouldn’t he let her crawl around on the mattress? The floors are filthy and hard as hell on her knees, so why wouldn’t he let her scoot around on the soft and clean mattress next to him?” she asked, hands thrown upwards in frustration. “Honestly, Chimney, you act as though Buck is completely unable to look after her on his own.”

“He is, Maddie,” Chimney protested firmly. “He simply isn’t responsible enough to be trusted to care for her on his own.”

“That’s your opinion, Howard,” Maddie shot back furiously, full on Mama Bear mode engaged. “Buck adores Jee and has been a big help in helping me take care of her while we’ve been here. She goes right to sleep for him and no one has ever made her stop crying as fast as he can. Jee thinks her Uncle Buck is the coolest person in the world.” Chimney flinched back as her finger stabbed hard into his chest. “Which brings me to my next point, Howard Han. What the **hell** were **you** thinking, taking our daughter on a wild goose chase?”

“You were in trouble, Maddie!” he reminded her hotly. “I was trying to save you.”

“From what?” she demanded. “From what I’m able to understand from Hen, I was already in treatment at the Resilience Treatment Center and committing myself thoroughly to therapy by the time you took off! I was doing what I needed to do to come home to both of you and to Evan, and you were off on a wild goose chase.”

“How was I supposed to know you weren’t leaving the city, Maddie?”

“Maybe by remembering I made my brother a promise that I wouldn’t leave him again.” She frowned, arms coming up to fold furiously across her chest as she glared at him. “A promise no force on this earth is ever going to convince me to break again. I have done a lot wrong by Evan, and this is one promise I can keep.”

“You should have told me.”

The look Maddie gave him in reply could have burned steel, her tone set easily to match. “So you could try to convince me all over again that I was a great mom and everything would get better, if I just stuck it out? Sticking it out was making it worse. I had to do the right thing for Jee.” He flinched back as her finger stabbed into his chest again, informing him furiously, “Just like you, as her **father**, should have had Jee’s well being as the first thought on your mind too. How could you just . . . truck her all over this country without a damned care in the world for her development? She’s crawling, Howard! You two should have been practicing in the living room together, instead of her stuck in a car seat while you chased my ghost.”

“I was trying to be a good boyfriend.”

“And in doing so, you failed to be a good **father**!” she shot at him, causing him to flinch. “Jee has to take priority, Howard, no matter what. She’s a baby! She relies on us to take care of her! But you were more concerned by what **you** needed, by what **you** wanted. How **DARE** you yell at Evan for letting Jee stretch her boundaries under his care, when you couldn’t even be bothered to put her safety above your own desires?”

Chimney stared at her. “**You** are going to lecture **me** about putting Jee above my own desires? Are you kidding?”

“And what does that mean?”

“You **LEFT**, Maddie,” he reminded her. “You left her at the 118 and disappeared. And you wanna preach to me about putting her safety above my own desires?”

Maddie calmed visibly, going cold and rational in a way that set Chimney on his heels. He’d hoped she would see the situation from his side, if he reminded her what she had done. Instead, it only seemed to have hardened her resolve. She cocked her head at him for a long moment. Then, in an exceptionally rational and even tone, she asked, “What would you have done if I’d waited with Jee at the apartment, to tell you I needed to leave to get help?”

“I wouldn’t have let you leave,” he replied instantly. “You were safest with us.”

“Maybe I was,” she replied with a solemn nod and a frown. Then, looking back up at him, she continued, “But, in my head . . . Jee wasn’t safe with me there. And for her sake, I couldn’t let you talk me out of going away, Howard. I had to put Jee’s safety first, because I’m her mother and that’s my job.” She swallowed hard, the heel of her hand coming up to press against her cheek to push away the tears starting to trickle down her cheek. “That didn’t make it an easy decision, or a choice I wanted to make. It simply made it the right one.”

Tossing her hair back over her shoulders, she continued, “I left her in the safest place I knew, with the people we both trusted to take care of her. I left you a video, with my feelings on why I was leaving - giving you the opportunity to see my face and hopefully understand why I was doing what I was doing. I did what I thought was right, Howard. Because at the end of it all, Jee had to come first. And if she doesn’t come first for you . . . that’s an ideological issue that we will not

recover from. I'm sorry, but I meant what I said. It's over between us."

"Look, I'm sorry for punching Buck!"

"It's not **just** you punching Evan, Howard!" Maddie interrupted, her frustration and her anger visible in her face. "It's that you punched my brother . . . my brother, who you know I love fiercely, in a moment of **anger**." She swallowed hard. "Just like Doug would do, when I did something he didn't approve of."

The comparison set Chimney on his heels and he swallowed hard even as he protested, "I am nothing like Doug."

"I didn't say you were," she reminded him gently, far kinder than he was currently feeling like he deserved. "I did say a behavior you exhibited is alarmingly like one my former husband did. And logically, I know you will never hurt me or Jee . . . you would never lay a hand on either of us." Her features hardened this time as she demanded, "But if Evan had been my sister and not my brother . . . would you be as okay as you are right now with punching her, when she kept the secret I asked her to keep?"

Chimney stammered, caught off guard by the question. Maddie smiled at him, her tone gentle as she insisted, "That's all I'm saying, Howard. You punched Evan because you knew he'd forgive you. Because it was the easy choice to release the anger you were feeling - a bad one, but an easy one. And then you made a second bad choice, by refusing to consider Jee's development and safety and well-being. Those two things are things . . . I can't forgive right now. And you demanding that I do . . . it's not fair, to me or to Evan."

"Maddie, I'm sorry."

"I'm not the one you need to apologize to," she replied firmly. After a moment, she snorted, "And the one you **do** need to apologize to, doesn't think you did anything wrong. So, for all of our sake's, you need to leave and not come back. We will talk, about Jee . . . but not here and not right now."

One hand reached out to her, his heart jerking his chest as she instantly yanked backwards and out of reach. "Please, Howard. Don't make this harder than it has to be on all of us . . . just go."

With that she turned away and Chimney found himself standing in the hallway alone, with nothing else to do but go.

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Buck cuddled Jee close, trying to soothe her frantic tears as Bobby bullied her father from his hospital room. He hummed low in his chest, forcing a meager smile at her in hopes it might help all while knowing that the pained grimace probably only frightened her more. "Here," Bobby insisted, bending over to take her gently, "let me take her for a minute. Just to calm her down."

Jaw wobbling a little bit as he gave her up willingly, Buck watched as Bobby took her, knowing how important it was that someone with regulated emotions comfort her. Otherwise, Jee would just feed off of Buck's chaotic feelings and continue to cry and scream. Bobby bounced around with the little girl, big hand smoothing over the curve of her back as he hummed to her gently, soothing her wails into occasional sniffles and then into silence. "Buck, stop it," his captain insisted, watching him with warm eyes and a smile. "You didn't do anything wrong."

His head shook, hands trembling a little as he flipped through pages in search of a blank page. Shame and horror clogged his throat at the thought she might have gotten hurt because he let her

crawl around on his bed. *She could have gotten hurt.*

Bobby tilted a little to read the words, before his head shook, “Not possible. I know you better than that. You’re so good with Jee, okay? You always put her needs ahead of your own and, every time I’ve ever seen you together, you make an effort to keep her safe. You wouldn’t have let anything happen to her.”

*What if she had gotten hurt?* Buck demanded, lines slashed under “had” multiple times to emphasize his sudden fear over the thought.

“Then it would have been an accident,” he replied, looking down at the little girl with a smile. “There we are, Ms Jee. That’s better, huh, sweet girl? You want your Uncle Buck again?”

Jee made a soft sound, grabbing for her uncle and Bobby moved to lay her down next to him, Buck pulling her close for cuddles instantly. Jee reached up for his face, cooing softly as Buck bent to rest his forehead against her own. “See,” Bobby coaxed gently, reaching over to touch Buck’s shoulder, “everything’s just fine.”

Buck’s eyes slipped closed as he took long, slow breaths of Jee’s sweet lavender scent. Bobby reached back and grabbed the chair, pulling it closer and resting his elbows against the mattress. “We’re going to need to decide what happens next. You know that right?”

He could feel the confusion on his face as he looked up with a frown. Bobby nodded at the silent question, mouth twisting as he insisted, “Chim is family. He’s Jee’s father and Hen’s best friend. But what he did . . . to you . . . Buck . . .” Bobby trailed off, a fierce frown on his face as Buck ducked his head over Jee in hopes of hiding from his censure. “Buck, that wasn’t okay.”

Buck jolted upwards, staring at Bobby with wide eyes. “It wasn’t,” he insisted with a firm shake of his head. “And then considering everything that happened as a result of him punching you? Buck, I can’t just sweep that under the rug. I don’t think anyone at the **station** will let me just sweep that under the rug.”

Reaching for his pen, Buck scrawled sloppily across the bottom of the page, *My fault. I lied.*

“You didn’t lie. You kept a secret your **sister** asked you to keep.” Bobby reached out and touched his head gently, fingertips scrubbing tenderly over the curve of his skull until Buck looked up to meet his eyes once again. “This is not your fault, Buck. And we need to have a conversation now about what happens next. Because just from what I’ve been hearing, if Chimney comes back to the 118, there will be people who leave.” He snorted. “Starting with Eddie. No surprise there.”

Buck frowned then sighed. “He’s your best friend, Buck,” Bobby reminded him through soft, gentle laughter. “He’s pissed about this.”

*I’ll talk to Eddie.* Buck promised with a meager smile. *Chimney’s a good paramedic.*

“He is,” his boss conceded with a nod. “However, he’s not portraying the kind of emotional steadiness the LAFD looks for in a paramedic right now, either - calmness, rational thought, and emotional detachment, which is where a lot of people are concerned. Even Hen suggested that Chimney seek mandatory counseling before coming back to work.”

Buck couldn’t help it - he whispered, “Hen?”

“She’s Chim’s best friend,” Bobby replied with a nod, “but she’s your friend too. And she’s not exactly thrilled about some of the realizations this situation has forced her to make. Apparently,



even Karen's not thrilled about this situation and has made Hen aware of that."

The younger man ducked his head back over Jee's body, thoughts churning as he tried to come to terms with everything that had happened because he'd been punched in the face. With a sigh, he scribbled, *I should have just told him.*

"That's an existential crisis you're going to have to take up with your sister," Bobby laughed gently. "She asked you to keep her confidence, and nothing you kept from him directly endangered him, Maddie or Jee. Personally, I think Chim was overwrought and distressed and reacted in a fit of anger to a situation he didn't know how to control. It's the **way** he reacted, however, that I take issue with."

Both men looked over at the door as Maddie came inside, looking surprisingly calm and resolute, though Buck could see the red rims of her eyes leftover from tears she refused to cry. He hummed a little, knowing she'd understand, forcing a pained smile when she looked at him. She smiled in reply, head shaking as she promised, "He's gone. He won't be back." Moving to the side of the bed, she rested her hand on his calf and asked, "How are **you**? Considering what he said while we argued, I get the feeling he may have been unnecessarily harsh."

He shook his head and then shrugged. Bobby looked over at her, tone gentle as he asked, "What did the treatment center say?"

"They want me to talk to the hospital's therapist before they sign off on letting me leave inpatient treatment. Quinn," she tripped over the familiar address for a moment, before correcting herself, "Dr Faerian is going to set up the appointment and will come find me once it's made."

"And if the therapist says you should go back?"

"They'll send a car to come and get me," she replied with a shrug. Turning to Bobby, she asked, "And you're sure it's okay to take Jee with you, if I can't come."

"Absolutely," he agreed with a firm nod. "Athena and I will be thrilled to have Jee and Buck to wait on for a bit. And Harry is excited too - he promised to keep Buck busy, so he didn't get bored."

Buck kept the laughter from his face as he chuckled, overwhelmed with fondness for the young man once again. He fumbled his pen a little bit then scribbled, *Am I allowed to be a little worried?*

"I'd be worried if you weren't," Bobby retorted with a grin. His attention back on Maddie, he promised, "If you have to go back, just let us know when they release you, okay? Either 'Thena or I will come and get you to take you home."

"Thank you, Bobby."

"That's what family does," he reminded her, one arm up and out to offer her a hug.

Maddie rushed into the man's embrace, eyes closing as he wrapped her up in his arms and held her tight. Buck smiled, rearranging his head on his pillow as he watched them. Both he and Maddie had missed out on the whole idea of attentive and loving parents growing up, and it wouldn't be a stretch to say that both Buckley siblings soaked in the easy affection the Grant-Nash parents tossed out so effortlessly.

It was nice to be loved and cared for - with any luck, maybe one day Buck would feel like he deserved it.

It had been a week since Buck and Jee had come with Bobby from the hospital, and at least two since Maddie had joined them under the Grant-Nash roof. The coughing persisted, though the fits were fewer and far between. Still, Buck refused to talk much, though his smiles were coming much easier as he took care of Jee while Maddie was still in treatment.

The night before Bobby was scheduled to return to work and long after the rest of the house had gone to bed, Athena and Bobby laid awake to talk about what would need to happen next. Bobby had been putting off Chimney's return to work while he was at home with Buck and Jee, but tomorrow would be the day to face the music for everyone.

"What are you going to do?" Athena asked, looking down at their hands playing together on the mattress between them. "The Buckaroo still thinks it's his fault and it's breaking my heart to have him so quiet."

Bobby shook his head, struggling with his own concern for the youngest member of his firehouse as well as frustrated about what to do to resolve the situation as a whole. "On the one hand Buck is right - Chimney punched him off the clock, so I can't do anything officially."

"So he's just going to get away with it."

"Didn't say that," he countered with a small, half smile. "Because on the other hand, I have a firehouse that will go into revolt if this situation isn't resolved somehow. More than a few people have expressed their intention to leave if he comes back, or there isn't some kind of punishment for Chim putting Buck in the hospital."

"This is why I don't want to be a lieutenant," she reminded him with a smirk. "Some of the decisions you have to make means nobody wins."

"The worst part is that Buck continues to believe he deserved it, regardless of what any of us have had to say to the contrary. He even pulled me aside and gave me transfer papers."

Athena rocketed upwards, staring down at him in horror. "What?"

"I took great pleasure in ripping them into pieces," he assured her, gentling her back onto the covers next to him. "Buck is ours, 'Then. He's stuck with us."

"So what does that mean?"

"I don't know," he replied, flopping over onto his back. "Honestly, I wish I knew."

"Have you talked to the Chief and gotten his opinion on the matter?" she asked, reaching out to smooth her fingertips over the curves of his face. "Could it be you're just too close to the situation, so you're having a hard time finding an impartial solution?"

"Probably," he agreed with a grunt, interlocking his fingers with hers on his chest. "I'll call him in the morning before shift, to have him meet me at the station."

She hummed her agreement, shifting to cuddle closer. Bobby chuckled, pulling her closer with a kiss pressed into her hair. For a long time, the couple was silent, before Athena broached in that implacable tone of hers which allowed for no argument, "You know I want to adopt them both, right?"

Bobby burst into laughter at the statement. "How about we content ourselves with Grandma and

Grandpa to Jee?"

"And adopt Buck."

Bobby moved to protest for all of a moment, before his jaw clicked closed and he sighed, "And adopt Buck."

"Excellent," she taunted with a giggle, "I knew you'd see it my way."

The next morning, Bobby disappeared from their bed at a ridiculous hour of the morning to get ready for his first shift in a week and a half. He pressed a kiss to his wife's hair, then moved to check on the rest of the house. Maddie and Jee slept peacefully in their room, Jee's soft sleepy giggles an indication of a very happy dream. Harry lay sprawled across his bed, having kicked all of his covers off and snoring loudly enough to shake down the house. Buck's room, however, proved to be empty, the bed neatly made and as spotless as the loft where Buck lived.

Bobby came to the door of his room and listened to the house, trying to pinpoint the boy Athena seemed set on making her own. At least through love, if not legally. It took a bit before he caught sight of the cracked open sliding glass door and found Buck seated outside with his notebook and a cup of coffee. "Hey," he greeted, smiling as Buck twisted to look back at him with solemn eyes and an expressionless face. Ignoring that for right now, he pointed at the mug and asked, "There any more of that?"

He nodded, gesturing towards the kitchen. "Thanks, kiddo," Bobby insisted, leaning down to press a kiss into the reckless curls. This conversation was going to need coffee - somehow Bobby didn't think it would be easy in any way, shape or form. He doctored his coffee quickly, then came out to join Buck on the patio and settled down on the lawn chair beside him. Watching him for a long moment, he broached cautiously, "You're up early."

Buck didn't look up from where he scribbled in his notebook, one shoulder hitching silently. Bobby leaned over a little bit to see what had his attention and found a startlingly well rendered picture of one of the birds in their trees. "That's amazing work, Buck," Bobby complimented genuinely. "I didn't know you could draw like that."

The younger man only shrugged again, still silent and eyes still pinned to his drawing. Deciding to take a risk, Bobby teased lightly, "You know, Hen and I used to tease you that one day we'd find your mute button, but we didn't actually mean it."

"I know," he whispered, jaw motionless as the words left barely moving lips.

"Talk to me, Buck," Bobby implored, setting his coffee to the side and turning to face him completely. "Tell me what's churning in that brain of yours."

"Don't fire him."

Bobby snorted a little bit, one hand shoving back through his hair with a sigh. "I'm not gonna fire him, Buck. I'm not going to be involved at all, actually. Chief Alonzo is going to meet me at the station - I'm too close to this, and I don't want anyone saying there was any favoritism, regardless of what the final decision ends up being. Okay? I promise - no matter what, Chimney still has a job."

Buck nodded, eyes still on his sketch. Bobby leaned forward, elbows on his knees and hands clasped in front of him as he hedged, "Do you mind if I ask you a question?"

He blinked, lifting his head and turning to look at Bobby with visible confusion. Bobby smiled,

tone still gentle as he promised, "You could say no, if you wanted. I'm just curious."

Tongue flicking out to lick along his lower lip curiously, it took a moment for Buck to nod his acceptance of the request. "Okay."

"Okay," Bobby echoed, watching his hands for a moment, before looking up at Buck and asking, "What do you want to do?"

Honest to God, Buck blinked, visibly thrown by the question. "You're asking me?"

Almost instantly, Bobby found himself cursing a veritable laundry list of people in his head, all of whom had given this amazing young man reason to doubt how amazing he was. "Yes, Evan," he agreed with a slow nod, "I'm asking you. Because you're the one who got punched. And you're the one who spent weeks in pain **and** the one who spent a week in the hospital after the fact so they could fix your face." His chin dipped in a solemn nod. "I want your opinion, and I promise I will do everything I can to **try** and accommodate that request. But Buck, my hands might be tied, okay? I want you to know that too before you say anything."

Bobby could see the way Buck chewed on his lower lip, the way he fidgeted with his pencil and the edges of his notebook. Could see the questions and the thoughts in his head, before at last he looked back at Bobby and announced in that soft quiet way that would never in a million years feel normal, "I want to go back to work. And I just want things to go back to normal. I want to be a family again."

He took a deep breath in, swallowing in acceptance of the answer. It had been the most Buck had said in two weeks. It had also been the single most heartbreaking thing Bobby had ever heard him say.

Another deep breath in through his nose was all Bobby could manage before he pushed himself to his feet and bent to press a kiss into his curls. "All right, kiddo. I'll see what I can do." Heading back into the house and out the front door, it wasn't until Bobby was in his truck that he said what he was really thinking.

"Damn it, kid. You're breaking my heart."

Honestly, he didn't know what he expected when he arrived at the firehouse and found almost the entirety of the firehouse lingering around his office. Hen and Eddie were at the back of the ambulance, being remarkably unsubtle about the attention they were paying to his office door. With a sigh, he hitched his bag further up his shoulder and came to join them, tone bemused as he asked, "Am I to assume that your focus means the Chief and Chim are already here?"

"Chim just got here and Chief's not here yet," Hen replied, glancing towards him before turning back to his office door. "What's gonna happen, Cap?"

"Not my call," he replied, glancing towards the door with a frown. "I have Buck's written statement about the situation, and Chimney will give his in person to the Chief. Then the Chief will make a choice."

Eddie's jaw worked angrily as he insisted, "If I have to spend any time with him this shift, Cap, I **will** punch him. And I will happily be fired for it."

"And you'll upset Buck even more than he already is." One hand came up to scrub over his face as Bobby informed the two of them, "He just wants us to be a family again."

Hen groaned a little, eyes slipping closed as though the words were physically painful. “God, that kid is too good for this world.”

A grunt slipped free of Eddie as he hopped up into the ambulance, visibly at loose ends but determined to look busy so he didn’t have to engage any further into the conversation. Bobby touched Hen’s shoulder, nodding his head in the young man’s direction with a whispered, “Keep an eye?”

“You got it,” she agreed in a tone as quiet as his own whisper.

He squeezed her shoulder in thanks, before moving towards the locker room to get dressed for shift.

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Eddie didn’t know how long Bobby and the Chief sat in the Captain’s office with Chimney, but he did know he was going to shake himself out of his skin if someone didn’t say something about the situation soon. He bit off Ravi’s head for bringing him the wrong equipment, then got surly with Hen about her organizational system within the vehicle. Basically, he turned into the worst kind of asshole from the frustration of the wait.

Fortunately Hen did not believe in biting her tongue when someone was being a moron, and she smacked him . . . hard . . . once he’d bitched about a lock box he couldn’t open in the ambulance. “God, you’re like a dog that got bit by a rattlesnake,” she snarled, throwing the right set of keys at his face.

Rounding on her with a fierce frown, one hand flew up to catch the keys while the other flung in the direction of the office door. “This whole thing is bullshit, Hen. Why is there even a question about what happens next? He punched Buck in the **face**, unprovoked and without cause.”

“I know,” she replied, huffing out a soft sigh. “I’m angry too. Watching Buckaroo collapse that day? Then seeing him on the vent for all those days?” She blew out a breath and took a seat on the bumper of the ambulance. “It shouldn’t have happened. I’m sure there are excuses Chim could give, and maybe even a plea of temporary insanity from the stress and the fear for Maddie. All of it boils down to the fact the punch was assault - it happened in Buck’s own home, and was perpetrated by someone Buck invited in without coercion. The question becomes, how much of what happens outside the firehouse comes under the purview of the firehouse.” She cocked an eyebrow at him, tone turning arch as she reminded him, “I seem to remember you doing some ill-advised punching at one time, too. As a reminder.”

Eddie’s face twisted at the reminder of his street-fighting days. He huffed, plopping down onto the end of the bumper with a groan. “Buck wants us to be a family again,” he complained and absolutely did not whine. “For the love of God, is there any way to transplant at least one bone in his body devoted to self-preservation?”

“We wouldn’t love him nearly as much if we could,” she laughed, coming to her feet at the sight of the office door opening. “Shit. I guess now we find out what they have to say about it all.”

“Finally,” Eddie grunted, hopping out of the ambulance to stand by Hen, his arms coming up to fold over his chest as he glowered towards the door. “I’m about to go insane.”

“Too late,” Hen snarked.

Chief Alonzo, an older Latino man with laugh lines and an imposing frown, moved into the middle

of the bay floor, calling out for the rest of the crew to join him. "Can I have everyone's attention, please?" he boomed, looking around at the firefighters gathered in the area. Some stood up in the loft leaning on the railing, while others stood around the bay attentively. "As I'm sure all of you know, Firefighter Buckley was involved in a situation a few weeks ago. I'd like you all to know that he has since been released from the hospital and, I have it on good authority, he should be back with A Shift in the next two weeks."

The entirety of A Shift let out a cheer at the news, earning a grin from Eddie at the support for Buck he could hear in their voices. The Chief grinned at the cheers, hands coming up to wave everyone back to silence with a grin. "Captain Nash will be sure to pass on your excitement." Here he sobered, frowning as he announced to the room at large, "Now, as to the other part. As per Firefighter Buckley's express wishes, Lieutenant Han will be returning to work with the 118's A Shift, effective immediately."

Eddie's quiet groan of dismay got lost among those of everyone else. The decision didn't appear popular, though no one seemed willing to say so aloud. The Chief lifted his hands for everyone's attention once more, continuing as though he had not been interrupted. "This is a probationary decision only," he insisted firmly. "Should, at any time, a complaint be lodged regarding Lieutenant Han's conduct on shift, Firefighter Buckley's request will be considered null and void. Lieutenant Han will be suspended without pay for a period of two weeks, and a replacement will be selected from B Shift." Running gimlet eyes over the entire room, he barked, "Is this clear?"

"Sir, yes sir," the entire crew announced, most of the people Eddie could see giving Chimney varying looks of disapproval and disappointment.

"Good!" he barked. "Dismissed. Good shift today, people! You do damned fine work!"

The Chief turned away from the crew, offering a hand to Bobby who shook it while the two men shared a quiet exchange. Bobby returned to his office as Alonzo took his leave, thereby leaving Chimney standing awkward and alone in front of the doors. Eddie's nose curled and he turned away, returning to work on the ambulance. One by one, the others followed suit - not a single person welcomed the man back to shift.

It felt like the lawsuit all over again. Except this time, the feelings of betrayal? Held weight.

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The knock on the door pulled Maddie's attention away from where her daughter and her brother were crawling around on the floor of the living room together as she sat on the couch and pretended to read a book. Half an hour ago, Jee had taken off scooting towards the kitchen then giggled when her uncle crawled after her, catching her by the ankle and tugging her gently back towards him while flat onto her belly. It had turned into an epic game, and even Evan had a small smile on his face as he chased her around the room on all fours. Evan pushed up to sit on his heels, head turned towards the door with a small frown before turning to look at Maddie curiously. "I don't know who it is, Ev," she replied with a smile, standing up and reaching out to ruffle his hair. "Can you keep an eye on Jee for me, and I'll get the door. It's probably a package or something."

He nodded, still watching the door before Jee squealed indignantly at being ignored and immediately had her uncle's undivided attention once more. He mimicked a silent roar, earning a squeal before they were off once more. Maddie took a moment to smile at them, before rushing to answer the door.

She opened it to find Dr Faerian - Quinn - standing on the doorstep. They blinked at each other in surprise, Maddie unable to help it as she scanned him over from head to toe. Before this moment,

she'd only seen him in scrubs, but within the privacy of her own mind she could admit to the fact that he looked equally amazing in jeans and a well-worn Van Halen t-shirt. Suddenly realizing she had been silent since opening the door, her eyes flew open and she blurted, "Hi! Oh wow, I'm so sorry. I just . . ." here she trailed off, her smile turning shy as she confessed, "I wasn't expecting you."

"Sorry," he insisted with a smile. "I would have called, except you gave me an address and not a phone number."

"Oh," she replied, hand coming up to cover her face in quiet embarrassment. "Well that's just ridiculous."

"It did take some fast talking at the gate," he replied with a chuckle. "Fortunately Sergeant Grant? She recognized my name and had the security guard let me in."

"Talk about dedication," she joked, her cheeks warming with more than just embarrassment. "How are you?"

"I'm good," he agreed with a nod. "How's your brother?"

"Still not talking much," she replied, twisting to look back at where Evan and Jee had devolved into "wrestling" together on the floor, Evan's arms wrapped around her and keeping her safe as he rolled them both across the carpet. "He's in better spirits, though, so that's good."

"Were you able to get everything resolved?" he asked, with a kind smile. "With your father's daughter, I mean."

"Not really," she replied with a shrug. "I just got released from the treatment center a couple days ago, and Howard is back to work today. I'm sure we'll figure it out though."

"That's good."

Leaning against the doorframe, Maddie let her smile go soft as she watched him. "Quinn? What is it?"

"It's wildly inappropriate, is what it is. I was your brother's doctor, and the ethics of this are . . . shaky, at best," he confessed, watching her with a sheepish frown. "But even knowing that, I can't stop thinking about you."

"Quinn . . ." she started, startled to a stop as he held up a hand to stop her.

"Please," he insisted fervently, "let me finish."

She swallowed then nodded. "Okay."

He smiled at her warmly, then took a deep breath for courage. "Okay. Like I said, I can't stop thinking about you. And with everything going on in your life, I one thousand percent understand if it's not even a thought in your mind. But I want you to know . . . I **need** you to know. I think you're amazing. And one day, whenever that is, I want you to know that I'm here. Not waiting, because that implies I'm impatient or that I'm trying to pressure you, but here."

"And in the meantime?"

His head shook with a sheepish smile as he promised her, "That's entirely up to you. I will abide by anything you want - friendship, acquaintanceship, hell even if you want nothing to do with me ever

again. The ball is in your court, Maddie Buckley. The next move is entirely yours.”



# Friction

## Chapter Summary

Friction - A noun meaning the following:

- 1) the resistance that one surface or object encounters when moving over another.
- 2) the action of one surface or object rubbing against another.

Or

- 3) conflict or animosity caused by a clash of wills, temperaments, or opinions.

And didn't that just explain everything about Buck's first day home.

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The sinus infection Buck had been dealing with for the last four weeks still raged like a persistent pain in his ass.

However, Dr Faerian had proven himself one of Buck's new favorite people when he promised Buck could go back to work as long as he accepted he wouldn't be running into any active fires until his sinuses and lungs cleared up.

This promise had forced Buck to do the mature and responsible thing, going to Bobby and asking to have a talk about everything. Which prompted a long, in depth conversation about everything Buck would be allowed to do if Bobby let him go back to work. Considering how excited Buck was just to get back to work, he agreed to all of Bobby's restrictions willingly, desperate just to get back to work and to his family.

Bobby had laid down the law—Buck wouldn't be man behind, though he would be remaining behind for a while. His tasks around the station house would be limited to strictly helping Bobby with the cooking, keeping track of inventory, and stocking the trucks and ambulances appropriately.

In a word, Buck would get his clipboard back.

Buck literally counted down the days, equal parts eager to go back to work and upset he wouldn't get to spend all of his time with Jee anymore. Maddie had elected to go back to work at Dispatch, to the delight and satisfaction of Sue Blevins and his sister's best friend, Josh Russo. Buck had been solely responsible for Jee after her return to work, and Jee had quite gleefully joined Christopher as tied for the top spot on Buck's list of "Best Kids Ever"!

Furthermore, his sweet girl kept him distracted and entertained while his face healed. He would miss her desperately once he went back to work. Him and Maddie had chosen a daycare close to the station, so Buck could get to her quickly if something went wrong.

Buck was practically a ball of nerves at the thought of anything going wrong at the daycare, but he found it was easier to focus on his worry for Jee than all the things that could go wrong on his first

day back at work.

And, boy, did things go wrong.

Buck woke up that morning once again hacking his lungs out and struggling just to breathe through the shit still clogging up his nose and lungs. Maddie came bolting into his room, pulling him upright and over his knees, her hand gentle and soothing as she ran her hand up and down his spine.

“Evan,” she murmured, “you need to breathe, sweetheart. Just go slow, but deep in through your nose.”

“I can’t,” he hiccupped, eyes slipping closed as his breathing hitched with the force of his coughing.

Her tone was implacable, firm and every inch the nurse she had once been, as she scolded, “You can. You just need to focus, Evan. Keep your eyes closed and listen to the sound of my voice . . . follow along with me.”

Leaning into her for a minute, he heard his breathing hitch as he forced himself to focus. Soon enough, the coughing had eased and he was breathing raggedly but steadily.

“Ugh,” he groaned, flopping backwards with a sigh. “That sucked.”

Maddie chuckled a little, pushing herself back against the mattress to put her back against the headboard. Taking the unspoken offer, Buck rolled over to lay his head in her lap and sighed at the touch of her fingers through his hair.

“You haven’t had a fit that bad in a while,” she commented idly, swirling his curls around her fingers lazily. “You wanna talk about it?”

“Just . . .” he huffed softly with a frown before insisting, “I’m worried about Chim.”

“Howard is responsible for his own behavior,” she reminded him. “You heard Bobby, the same as me. The Chief put the onus for what happens next fully on his own shoulders.”

“Can’t things just go back to normal?”

To her credit, his sister’s voice was gentle but implacable as she insisted, “No.” Fingertips massaged his head tenderly as she reminded him, “Once he punched you, Evan, nothing would ever have the ability to be normal again.”

“And you say it’s not my fault,” Buck grumbled, then flinched sharply at the pinch of her fingers around the top of his ear.

“None of that,” she ordered. “We’ve talked about this, and it’s still not your fault. I asked you to keep a secret and Howard punched you—if we’re looking to assign fault, it lies with us and not with you.”

Buck let his features twist petulantly as he teased her in a playful whine, “I’m telling Mom and Dad that you pinched me.”

Maddie burst into laughter, shoving him across the mattress and sending him rolling away laughing.

“You’re a pest, you know that?” she scolded, getting up from the bed and heading towards the

door.

“Love you, Mads!” he called cheerfully, resting his cheek on his folded arms as he watched her leave.

Her head shook as she paused in the doorframe, turning back to him with a soft, fond smile. “I love you too, Ev.” Nose wrinkling playfully, she teased, “You’re gonna have a very excited seven month old demanding your attention soon, so I’d get up and get dressed here soon, if I was you.”

Buck beamed at the reminder of his niece and all but bolted up from the bed and into the en suite attached to his room. He shut the door on his sister’s laughter, already whistling as he set to getting ready for the day. Buck rushed through his shower, all but scrambling into his clothes. After which he triple checked his go-bag for shift then left his room, entering the main room of the Grant-Nash home.

“Good morning,” he greeted everyone, dropping his bag next to Bobby’s own.

“Morning, Buck!” Harry called, rushing around the corner from the kitchen to throw his arms around Buck’s waist.

Buck chuckled, his arms tightening around the kid’s waist so he could haul him up off his feet, free hand ruffling his hair fondly. “Morning, Harry. Where is everybody?”

“Kitchen!” Bobby called in reply. “Get in here – I need someone who knows how to use a damn kitchen knife!”

“Coming!” he called, dropping Harry back to his feet with a grin. “What are you doing, squirt?”

“Setting the table,” he grumped, going back to his job with slumped shoulders and a frown.

Chuckling, Buck followed after him and then came into the kitchen to join Bobby at the counter. “What am I chopping?” he asked.

“Fruit,” his boss replied, gesturing towards the stack of apples, bananas and grapes sitting on the counter at Buck’s elbow.

“Can do!” He agreed, pulling two knives—a paring knife and a chef’s knife—from the block and getting to work on scrubbing the apples and grapes in the sink.

The two maneuvered around each other effortlessly, used to the close quarters in the firehouse kitchen. Granted, Buck’s attention remained on his job only as long as it took for him to finish the fruit salad, because about then he heard a delighted squeal and looked up to find his sister approaching with his niece on her hip.

“There’s my princess!” Buck cheered, abandoning the kitchen as he moved to take her from his sister.

Jee squealed, her hands coming up to grip on to his shirt collar as she used her legs to push on his hips and bounce cheerfully. One of Buck’s arms locked her close while the other hand gripped her little hand and started to waltz her around the living room to the accompaniment of her delighted giggles.

Maddie rolled her eyes as she patted his shoulder on her way past, teasing, “You spoil her.”

“No such thing,” he protested, looking down at Jee with a grin and a wink. “She’s too sweet to be

spoiled, isn't that right, Princess Jee?"

The baby giggled, her features lit up with adoration as she beamed at her uncle. Buck chuckled along with her, bending his head to rub his nose against her own and reveling in the touch of her hands coming up to cradle his jaw to hold him close.

"You're such a sweetheart, right? I just want to gobble you up like a treat!" Bending over with her clasped tightly in both arms, he nibbled playfully on her cheek to the loud announcement of, "Nom nom nom."

"Om 'om 'om," she babbled back in reply, delighted by the new sound as her hands made clutching motions against his face.

"Oh, are you trying to eat me?" he teased, switching sides and earning even more giggles. "You can't eat me!" he roared playfully, spinning them both around carefully. "I'm too big for your cute tummy!"

Jee laughed out loud, her eyes wide as they played together.

"Evan," Maddie called lightly from the table, one hand on her hip, "it's time to eat."

"Coming!" he chirped, skipping to the table. "What are you gonna have for breakfast, Princess?" he asked, strapping her tenderly into her high chair and then taking the seat next to her.

"Are we gonna have bananas?" he asked with bright eyes and faux excitement when she clapped her hands happily. Letting his face pull downwards in a frown, he continued, "Or icky, yucky cereal?"

"Ick ick!" she shouted, hands banging against the highchair tray.

"Cereal it is," he laughed, accepting the bowl from his sister who was watching him with a fond smile on her lips. "What?"

"You're just really good with her," Maddie replied, roughing up his hair and causing Buck to squeak indignantly. "She adores you."

One hand lifted to fix the mess his sister made of his curls, before sticking his tongue out at her. Then he turned to Jee and asked, "We're buds, huh, princess?"

Spooning out a bite of cereal, he offered it to the little girl with a grin. "Here's the real question though, princess - are we going to get it all over ourselves today?"

She blew a raspberry at him, though she had fortunately not had any yet and so both of them remained clean. Buck chuckled, making soft motor sounds which Jee recognized as the sound for incoming food. Giggling, his niece opened her mouth like a baby bird and accepted the bite primly.

"That's my girl," he cheered her, watching as she gummed the cereal into paste before swallowing then opened her mouth again for more.

Buck glanced over at Bobby as his boss jokes, "Are you going to remember to eat too? Pretty sure you have meds you have to take before we leave."

Frowning fiercely at the reminder of the gigantic freaking horse pills—Quinn called them antibiotics, but as far as Buck was concerned the jury was still out on that—Buck pouted at Bobby.

Bobby laughed, using his fork to point at Jee as he joked, “I didn’t remember you having a twin.”

Buck chuckled, leaning forward to kiss his niece’s cheek and earning more small giggles.

The rest of the morning passed quickly, before it was time to go. Maddie squeezed and cuddled on her daughter, going out to Bobby’s truck with him and Buck to put her in her car seat.

“And you’re sure it’s okay she’s so close to the firehouse,” Maddie asked again, climbing up to get Jee into the carseat Bobby had installed in the backseat.

“Maddie, I’m gonna be at the firehouse all the time right now,” Buck reminded her with a smirk. “If something happens, Jee can hang out with me at the station. She cannot hang out with you at Dispatch. Yes, we’re sure.”

“Okay,” she sighed, leaning over to press a scattering of kisses across Jee’s face, the baby chattering happily at her mother as Maddie poured on the affection. “You have my schedule and I have yours,” she reminded Buck, leaning forward to hug him. “And Evan, do **not** let Howard get to you, okay? It’s going to be okay.”

He gave her a meek smile as he insisted, “I guess we’ll find out.”

“Love you, Ev.”

Bending, he pressed a kiss to her cheek before climbing into the passenger seat, promising through the rolled down window, “Love you too, Mads.”

“Love you sweet girl!” Maddie called, waving at Jee through the window as Bobby started to roll down the driveway. “Love you baby Jee! Mommy loves you!”

Jee’s little hands waved over the top of her carset, babbling happily at the sound of her mother’s voice. Buck and Bobby both waved at Maddie once more, before Bobby turned the truck towards the station and they were off.

“Are you ready for today?” Bobby asked, glancing towards Buck curiously.

“I’m ready to go back to work, Bobby,” Buck promised with a small frown. “I’m ready for things to get back to something approaching normal.”

“And Chim?”

He shrugged, resting his temple against the side window as he insisted, “Everyone’s been telling me that what happened wasn’t my fault. I can’t get over the lingering sensation that there is something else I should have done to make this better for everyone.”

Bobby hummed quietly, noncommittal but understanding as he asked, “Like what?”

“I don’t know,” Buck replied with a rough snort. “Not have existed at all? That might have solved the problem before it was ever a problem to begin with.”

“And would have likely caused a whole other series of problems to boot,” Bobby reminded him. “Which would be bad for everyone. Jee might not even exist—Maddie might be dead.”

“Logically, I know that,” he promised with a self-deprecating smile. “Emotionally, it’s taking me a minute to come to terms with it all.”

Bobby reached out to touch his shoulder, squeezing firmly, before pulling the truck into the

parking lot of the daycare.

“Okay, so this will be the first test of how much you truly love her,” Bobby joked, folding his arms on the top of the steering wheel and leaning forward to look up at the building through the window.

“Oh yeah?” Buck asked, hopping out of the car and moving to pull Jee out of her car seat.

“Oh yeah,” his friend and boss laughed, “daycare drop off. The truest test of will—will you be able to leave her there? Or will you bring her with us? No one knows, but the universe is watching.”

“You’re ridiculous,” Buck replied with a roll of his eyes as he hitched the diaper bag over one shoulder. “Jee’s got this.”

Jee in fact did NOT have this.

Maddie had gone through all the preliminary stuff to make sure that everything was ready for Jee’s first day at daycare. Meaning all Buck had to do was take Jee inside, sign her in and pass her off to the attendants for the day. It should have been one of the easiest things in the world.

Buck got through everything up until he moved to hand her off to one of the attendants and Jee howled bloody murder. The tiny fingers of one hand clutched fiercely at the collar of his button-down while the other hand pushed and batted at the woman who tried to take her from Buck. She screamed and cried and shouted, “No! No!” to everyone who got close enough to hear.

Honest to God, Buck didn’t know what to do. He tried talking to her, he tried soothing her—nothing helped. Finally, the headmistress of the daycare—an older, grandmotherly type with a warm smile and kind eyes—came out of the back rooms to take in the situation.

“First time?” she asked, the new voice spooking Jee into startled silence.

“Yeah,” he replied with a meek smile. “How can you tell?”

“The first few drop offs are always the worst,” she replied, plucking Jee deftly from Buck’s grip. “For everyone, babies and daddies alike.”

“Oh, I’m not . . . I’m not her daddy,” he protested, head shaking as he assured the woman, “I’m her uncle. I’m a firefighter at the station right up here, so this was the most convenient location for my sister and me.”

“Well then, I apologize,” she laughed, bouncing Jee who was staring up at her with a mixture of confusion and curiosity. “Merida Blake - I own the place.”

“Evan Buckley,” he replied, accepting her hand and shaking it firmly before stepping back out of Jee’s reach again. “Most people call me Buck. This is Jee-Yun Buckley-Han, who is usually an angel baby.”

“Well, Jee’s just nervous,” the woman promised. “I promise—she might cry for a bit more once you leave, but in an hour she won’t even remember the fact you left her behind. And when you come to pick her up later, she will be ecstatic to see you again.”

He nodded, leaning forward to kiss Jee’s head quickly as he promised, “Love you, sweet girl.”

Jee started to whimper a little, her front hand reaching out with her little fingers making the clutching motions she always did when she wanted Buck to take her.

Ms. Blake smoothed a hand over Jee's back and promised, "Go on, now. She'll be all right. The sooner you leave, the sooner we'll be able to soothe her."

Buck nodded, waving at his niece then turning his back and all but bolting for the car. The way she screamed for him . . . if Bobby hadn't already had the car idling in front of the door, Buck would have absolutely run back for her. Instead, he sunk into the seat, right hand gripping the armrest in a death grip as he insisted, "Time to go."

"You did good," Bobby promised, gunning the engine towards work.

"I did **terrible**," Buck groaned, free hand coming up to pinch the bridge of his nose. "I left her there and ignored her screams and . . ."

"Evan," Bobby interrupted, the use of Buck's real first name demanding his entire focus, seeing as his captain only used the name when he needed to make sure Buck was listening.

He waited to be sure Buck was paying attention, before confessing with a sheepish smile, "The first time I dropped Brooke off at daycare? It took me two hours to leave . . . I was **so** late to work, but I couldn't bear to leave her crying."

"Oh God," Buck groaned, head dropping back, "take me back. I knew I shouldn't have left her there."

Bobby laughed outright as he shook his head, "No, Buck, you did the right thing. Staying as long as I did? It just made all the next times I dropped Brooke off at daycare that much harder, because now Brooke knew that if she cried hard enough, I wouldn't leave her there and she'd get what she wanted."

Scrubbing his hand through Buck's hair—and earning a squawk in reply—Bobby promised, "You did good, leaving as quickly as you did. The attendants are trained for this, and they'll get her settled down a whole lot quicker than they will if you're there. And tomorrow, when we drop her off again, it'll be a whole lot easier for both of you."

"Really?"

Bobby nodded firmly, "Hand to God." Pulling into the captain's parking space, the older man put the truck into park and then turned to Buck with a grin. "You ready for your first day back?"

Buck stared out the window at the facade of the firehouse that might be more his home than even his own loft, a smile growing on his face at the familiar comfort of it. "Beyond ready."

"All right then," Bobby laughed, clapping him companionably on the shoulder, "let's go see what chaos Hen and Eddie have cooked up to welcome you home."

Laughing at the statement, Buck stretched backwards to grab his bag and then hopped out of the front seat, only dimly aware of the frustrated tears drying in the corners of his eyes. "It is good to be home," he breathed, hitching the bag up onto his shoulder as he grinned.

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"Hen, you're making me fucking crazy," Eddie growled, as he rearranged the banner **again** at the paramedic's direction.

Ravi sent him a small smile from the other side of the sign, before following orders and moving the banner to Hen's specification. Eddie had to admit—Buck might have been hard on the Probie,

but he'd also trained him well. The curiosity that broke a gurney notwithstanding, the kid had proven to be well on his way to being an excellent firefighter. Granted, no way in hell would Eddie ever let Ravi replace Buck, but he could still be a part of A Shift alongside him.

If Eddie had his way? His best friend would be going nowhere.

"Oh shit!" Albert Han—the only one of the Han brothers that Eddie didn't currently want to punch—called out quietly from near the bay doors, scrambling across the room to join them. "They're here! Bobby's truck is here—he's pulling into his parking space."

"Get the damn thing up!" Hen ordered, putting Eddie and Ravi on a higher speed than they'd previously been working on.

By the time it was all said and done, Eddie only barely managed to scale down the ladder before Bobby led the way through the trucks.

"Surprise!" they all shouted as Buck stepped clear, his eyes going wide in shock at the greeting. "Welcome back, Buck!"

A knife of shame stabbed through Eddie at the awed look in Buck's face at everything the firehouse had put together for his return to work. Yeah, the firefam had thrown him a welcome back party at the Grant-Nash home after he recertified for work, but any good emotions from that party had been tarnished by first the embolism, then the tsunami, and lastly the lawsuit. And after the lawsuit . . . Hen had given him a damned cupcake.

As much as Eddie hated to admit it, Buck's shock over the surprise was more than justified.

"Wow, guys," he insisted, his eyes wide and smile huge as he scanned over the banner. "Thanks so much—I didn't expect all of this. I mean, I just got punched in the face or whatever."

Eddie grunted. One arm flung around Buck's neck, bending him over and hauling him along as he replied, "Yeah, we're not going down that road or I'm gonna be in a shit mood again."

"You're always in a shit mood, Eds," Buck laughed, twirling free of the hold only moments before Eddie's hand flashed out to smack him up the head. "What?" he asked, dodging the next playful swing, the two shadow-boxing as he teased, "Grumpy-faced Eds is practically your trademark, man."

"Just for that," Eddie quipped, one foot flashing out to trip his best friend backwards, though Buck rolled with it and landed back on his feet in scarcely a second, "I'm even more upset no one let me make your cake."

Bobby and Hen chuckled off to the side, Albert and Ravi watching the two friends go at each other with wide eyes until Buck used his height to his advantage to get Eddie in a neat headlock and essentially immobile.

"Say Uncle, Eds," Buck taunted as Eddie wiggled to get free.

"Fuck you," he snarled, still struggling despite Buck's ease in going along with his movements.

"Say Uncle," he replied, free hand pinching Eddie right over the ribs as a clear tickling threat.

Eddie reacted as though he'd been shot, flinching sideways with a howl. "No! Uncle! I swear to God, Buck, don't you dare!"



His best friend chuckled and let him go, hands out and open to the sides as Eddie scrambled out of reach. Shoving his finger in Buck's direction, he snarked, "You suck."

"Love you too, Eds," he replied, leaning over to pick up his bag and pull it over his shoulder again. Looking around at everyone, he grinned at the sight of Albert happily. "Albert, my man! Look at you!"

Albert and Buck crashed together in the way all good friends do, with lots of back slapping and laughter. "Hey," Albert insisted with a grin, hands on Buck's shoulders to push him backwards a step. "Look, man, I am really sorry for what happened to you."

"Totally not your fault," Buck insisted with a shake of his head and a small smile. Offering his fist, he promised, "We're cool."

A grin slipped across the younger Han's face as he knocked knuckles with Buck's own. "Look, I gotta go—I have a shift in a couple hours—but I wanted to be here to welcome you back."

"Thanks, Al," he insisted with a smile, "I definitely appreciate it."

The two hugged once more, before Albert practically bolted from the station house. Hen smiled at Buck next, equal parts relieved and ashamed as she stepped forward to hug him next. "I am so sorry, Buckaroo," she insisted, one hand coming up to cup his cheek. "Honest to God, I didn't know and I feel awful. I should have realized something was wrong, and a whole lot sooner."

"It's just fine, Hen," he promised, wrapping his arms around her waist and lifting her clear off her feet.

Hen laughed out loud, smacking at him as she insisted, "You put me down this instant! Geez, stop being such a golden retriever, okay? You're making me feel worse."

"Yes, Hen," he teased, smacking a kiss to her cheek and only just barely dodging her playfully retaliatory slap towards his head.

All too soon, the little knot of people broke up as they went their separate ways to get ready for shift. Buck disappeared into the locker room with Eddie to get changed, while Hen and Bobby went up to the loft—Bobby to start breakfast and Hen to do some studying for one of her classes.

Inside the locker room, Eddie straddled the bench in front of their shared locker as he insisted, "Chimney's here."

"Bobby told me," Buck replied, having already pulled on his uniform cargos. Then, he stripped off his button-down replacing it with his LAFD t-shirt under his uniform button-down even as he turned to face Eddie solemnly. "Eds, man, I need you to promise me something."

"No."

"I haven't even asked you yet."

"You didn't have to," Eddie reminded him, giving Buck the look he knew the younger man hated with a passionate. Everyone at the station had one, and where Buck thought the look meant "you're stupid, and I'm gonna tell you so," none of them used it that way. Eddie knew for a fact, his own meant "I love you too much to let you talk me into something that will hurt you."

If this whole situation with Chimney had taught the 118 anything, it was that Buck's self-esteem was worth a crock of shit. Definitely a work in progress with no set end goal in sight, as far as any

of them could see. The entire station—with one glaring exception—had promised to work on it together. How quickly they'd succeed, though, would be entirely dependent on Buck's willingness to see what they already knew—he was amazing and he deserved to have more people tell him so.

Buck's fingers worked quickly on the buttons of his shirt as he insisted, "Come on, Eds. I need you to do this for me."

"You're going to ask me to forgive Chim," he replied sharply, "and I can't do that, Buck. Okay? I **can't**. You could have **died**. Shit, I'm gonna carry the guilt of not being more concerned for the rest of my damned life, and he doesn't even feel bad about it. I cannot and I will not forgive him—as my best friend, I'm asking you to respect that. Please."

The younger man tucked his shirt in meticulously, still watching Eddie with solemn eyes. Eddie groaned, shoving up to his feet and turning to face the windows as he all but begged, "Come on, man. Don't ask me to forgive him."

"I'm not."

Eddie rounded to face him, eyebrows up and eyes wide as he echoed, "You're not?"

"Nope," he replied, the "P" popping playfully in a way directly at odds with the seriousness in Buck's eyes. "I'm not. Just like I didn't ask Maddie or Bobby to forgive him, and I'm not going to ask Hen. Just because I don't think it's his fault, doesn't mean I'm going to disrespect your feelings on the matter either."

Eyes narrowing suspiciously, Eddie watched him for a long moment before groaning, "I'm gonna regret this, aren't I?"

"You usually do."

"Fuck," he grunted, hands coming up to push back through his hair once more. "All right. Hit me with it. What are you asking me for?"

"Let it go."

Utterly deadpan, and entirely not joking, Eddie announced, "Fuck, Buck, that's worse."

Buck chuckled a little, his lips quirking up into a small, half-smile Eddie didn't recognize. "Regardless of what any of you say, I kept a secret from Chim that meant he spiraled out."

Buck's hand came up to forestall Eddie's protests, head shaking firmly as he continued, "I don't really want to hear it, Eds. I think we can establish the fact that neither of us are changing each other's minds by this point. My point, however, is that he's back at work and so am I. Everything that came before this moment is water under the bridge, and I just want things to go back to the way they were at work."

He huffed out a breath, shoving his hands back through his hair as he groaned, "I don't want to be tiptoeing around Chim. I don't want any of you to be defending my honor when he makes a joke that you think hurts my feelings. I just want things to be **normal**. Okay?" He let a small, sad smirk slip across his lips as he joked, "Honestly, if he wasn't making snide jokes, I'd worry about him or something, okay? So just . . . let it go."

The two friends stared at each other for a long moment, before Eddie groaned miserably, "Stop being too good for this world, okay? You're making me feel bad about being a grumpy old man."

Buck chuckled, slinging one arm over his shoulder with a grin. “I told you, you were a grumpy old man.”

Grumbling and pouting, Eddie shoved his friend and insisted, “Shut up.”

The two continued to chat as they jogged up the stairs to the loft, commiserating over the daycare drop off as well as talking about Christopher’s new science project he wanted Buck’s help with. They barely cleared the landing when Eddie felt Buck falter beside him, and Chimney’s presence on the couch made itself known. No one ever accused Eddie of leaving things to lie, and he fought to keep his tone calm as he joked, “Hey—look who’s back!”

Chimney looked over with stoic eyes, awkwardness growing as they stared at each other, before Chimney announced dully, “Buckley.”

Eddie could feel Buck’s flinch, though he said nothing about the situation and only replied in kind, “Chimney.”

The only reason Eddie didn’t say anything snide in response was the press of Buck’s boot into the top of his own foot, causing a grunt and a glare from Eddie towards his best friend. Pleading was clear on his face, reminding Eddie of his promise to let it go . . . a promise that was rapidly turning into the worst promise Eddie had ever made anyone. Let alone Buck, considering the fact Buck possessed absolutely lethal puppy eyes and damn if he didn’t know how to use them to get Eddie to do what he wanted. Honest to God, the human puppy was as bad as Christopher—no wonder Eddie always capitulated.

“Not fucking fair,” he grumped under his breath, huffing out a sigh and heading towards the kitchen with a chuckling Buck trailing behind.

This shift could not end soon enough.

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Over the last two weeks, Ravi had watched Lieutenant Han attempt to smooth as many rough edges as he could among the other members of their shift.

The newest member of Station 118 could tell the older man didn’t think he’d done anything wrong in punching Firefighter Buckley, but he seemed determined to get everyone to at least listen to his side. Not that it seemed to go very smoothly for him—most members of A Shift weren’t thrilled by the situation and had made their displeasure of the outcome known. Repeatedly and loudly, their volume and disgruntlement rising with every recitation.

As far as Ravi could tell, even Paramedic Wilson—“It’s Hen, Probie,” her kind voice in his head assured him, “just Hen.”—initially proved resistant to Lieutenant Han’s overtures, though he seemed to lean into their longtime friendship to convince her to at least listen to him.

Ravi smiled when every attempt the man made with Firefighter Diaz—Eddie—ended up summarily rebuffed, the man glaring and storming away before the lieutenant could get a word out.

All of that happened before Lieutenant Han even attempted to sway Ravi to his side, probably hoping that Firefighter Buckley’s taskmaster side would convince Ravi of the rightness of Chimney’s action.

He’d listened to him but he’d seen the way Lieutenant Han treated Firefighter Buckley long before the older firefighter ever collapsed at the station. Ravi didn’t think Lieutenant Han realized his wheedling in Ravi’s ear had gone in one ear and then out the other. Ravi’s mother had instilled in

him that actions spoke louder than words, and the lieutenant's actions up to the incident in question screamed.

Of everyone currently on A Shift, the only one Lieutenant Han had been completely unable to devote time to would be Captain Nash. The fire captain had taken time off to keep an eye on Firefighter Buckley as he finished his recovery and Lieutenant Han hadn't even seen him until that morning. Ravi could only assume that it wouldn't be very much longer before the lieutenant attempted to get into the captain's ear about the situation and wondered how long Captain Nash would let Lieutenant Han bend his ear before he found something else to do.

Somehow, Ravi didn't think it would take long.

As the probie, Ravi tried to stay quiet and stay out of the way, eyes peeled and attentive as he tried to learn everything he could. So when Captain Nash approached Ravi with Firefighter Buckley trailing behind, the younger man already holding his clipboard, Ravi stood and turned to face him.

"Buck's on light duty until his face is completely healed, so he's going to show you some of the duties performed by the man behind. Now, some of them aren't tasks Buck can complete at this time, but he's going to walk you through checking inventories, and then go through stocking the truck, the ladder and the ambulance."

Captain Nash's hand came up to ruffle Firefighter Buckley's hair with a paternal air, earning a sheepish grin, as he continued, "Buck knows every protocol we have backwards and forwards, so pay attention. If you do, I promise you'll learn more than you would have ever dreamed."

"Yes, Captain Nash," Ravi nodded agreeably, eager and willing to learn everything he could.

"It's just Cap, Ravi," the man laughed, slapping Firefighter Buckley gently on the back and then disappearing.

As for Firefighter Buckley, he smiled at Ravi, the gesture small but genuine. "How have you been, Ravi?"

"Good," he replied with a firm nod. "How are **you**?"

"Healing," Buckley insisted with a shrug. "All I can really ask for." Gesturing with the hand holding the clipboard, he asked, "Shall we?"

"Ready when you are," Ravi agreed eagerly, following behind as Firefighter Buckley led the way to the main stairwell leading from the loft.

From behind him, he could hear Lieutenant Han mutter, "Return of the clipboard. God help us all."

Ravi frowned a little bit, watching Firefighter Buckley to see what he'd say about the situation and found himself surprised when the older man only hunched his shoulders around his ears and said nothing. In fact, except for all but running down the stairs, Firefighter Buckley didn't seem inclined to do anything about the comment at all. Same for Firefighter Diaz and Paramedic Wilson—the desire to speak up was written clearly across their faces, but neither said anything despite their glares in Lieutenant Han's direction.

"Sir?" Ravi asked, rushing to catch up with Firefighter Buckley as the man strode towards the storage room.

"It's Buck," he replied over his shoulder, face already bent over his clipboard as he flipped through the pages attached. "What's up, Rav?"

Ravi blinked a little bit at the nickname, before quickening his pace and coming alongside him. "Do you mind if I ask you a question?"

"If it's about the job? Absolutely not," he replied, letting the pages fall back into place before turning to face him headon. "If it's about Chimney, yes, I do mind."

"Oh," he replied, a frown pulling at his lips as he considered it. "Sorry."

Buckley sighed, one hand coming up to push back through his hair for a moment as he considered Ravi. "Look, Rav, I just want to be here with the people I love and do my job, okay?"

"Even when he speaks to you that way?" Ravi asked, eyebrows furrowing as he fought to understand. "I mean, everyone here heard what the Chief said."

"I know they did," Buckley replied with a nod. "They heard the Chief say that I insisted Chim come back to work, here with A Shift."

Absently, Ravi wondered how much Firefighter Buckley knew about the rest of the Chief's conditions regarding Lieutenant Han's return to work. Then, watching him move away once more, he found himself wondering whether Firefighter Buckley knew about the other stipulations at all.

The probie spent a good majority of his shift following Firefighter Buckley around, as Buckley tutored him thoroughly in the appropriate checklists, regulations and protocols that went into even the most basic aspects of keeping a firehouse stocked with supplies.

About three hours into shift, Ravi finally saw Buckley falter, free hand reaching back in search of something to brace on. As though the action had conjured him, Firefighter Diaz was there in a hot second, grabbing Buckley bicep and lowering him gently to a bench behind them.

"Buck, come on, man," Diaz scolded, lifting one hand to press two fingers to Buckley's pulse.

"I'm fine, Eds," Buckley protested, his free hand coming up to brush Firefighter Diaz's hand away from his throat. "Just a little dizzy for a second."

"Are you drinking enough water?" Diaz pestered, hands moving to Buckley's face and feeling gently along the small bump Ravi could see in the side of his face. The titular zygoma bone, the fracture of which had sent the entirety of the 118 into a spiral of chaos. "Did you take your meds?"

"Yes, **Maddie**," Buckley snarked, pinning Eddie with a dark look.

"Hardy har har," Diaz snarked, eyes rolling as he crouched in front of Buckley with a frown. "Seriously, man, it's your first day back. You gotta take it slow, okay?"

"I raced around after Jee for weeks on my own, Eddie," Buckley insisted with a frown, "I think I can train the probie without needing to take it slow."

"If you were up to full strength," Diaz scolded, pushing to his feet and folding his arms over his chest as he scowled down at Buckley, "you and I would absolutely be on the same page there, my man."

"I am at full strength, Eds."

"You're not and we both know it, so don't even try that card with me. Furthermore, I haven't seen you sit down since you got here," Diaz snarked in reply, finger coming up to point at Buckley and stall whatever protest the younger man had been moving to give. "You're on light duty, Buck,

okay? And no one is expecting the entire station to get restocked at lightning speed. Take your time and sit down if you need to, all right? Or I **will** call Maddie to yell at you.”

“Tattle tale,” he huffed, tone almost a whine as he pouted up at the older firefighter.

Diaz glanced at Ravi with a grin and a roll of his eyes, insisting, “If you think he needs a break, you have the permission of all of us to force him onto a bench, okay, Probie?”

“Yes, sir.”

Diaz’s eyes rolled as he snarked for at least the thousandth time, “Kid, don’t call me ‘sir’. I work for a living. It’s Eddie - not Diaz, not sir . . . just Eddie.”

Ravi could feel his cheeks warm a little bit as he insisted, “Right. Sorry—I’ll remember.”

“Why don’t I believe you?” he asked with a smiling sigh. Then, pointing at Buck but still addressing Ravi directly, Firefighter Diaz ordered firmly, “Watch him. If he won’t listen to you, come find one of us. We’ll set him straight.”

The man turned back to his best friend—their friendship and partnership nigh on legendary at this point—he ordered fondly, “And Buck? Would you just behave yourself?”

“Me?” the blond firefighter chirped with a wicked grin and a smile. “Never.”

“Pest,” he scoffed, before mussing his hair and strolling away. Granted, he didn’t get very far before he turned back and ordered Ravi firmly, “Find anyone but Chimney. Under no circumstances, are you to go looking for Chimney to straighten Buck out. You got me?”

“Yes sir,” he replied with a firm nod, then grimaced. “I mean, Eddie. Yes, Eddie—I understand.”

Firefighter Diaz nodded and then turned on his heel, continuing off towards his own chores and leaving Buck to lean back against the wall with a harsh sigh. The man almost sounded breathless as he insisted, “Give me a few minutes, okay? We’ll get started again.”

“You heard Firefighter Diaz,” Ravi insisted firmly. “We’re not in a rush.”

“Eddie is a worrywart.”

Ravi’s shoulders shrugged as he moved to counter that assertion, though found himself interrupted by a snide comment about nepotism and laziness coming from inside the ambulance behind them. Under no circumstances could Ravi have misidentified the owner of that voice, and it would seem that neither could Firefighter Buckley. Where Ravi turned to find the voice with a frown, Buckley ended up having the exact opposite reaction.

Beloved Lakshmi, but Ravi could not understand how a man the size of Firefighter Buckley managed to shrink so dramatically in size. Nevertheless he watched him do it. Hunching into himself and his shoulders lifting to hide his ears, Buckley bent his head diligently over his clipboard as he set about sorting what they would need for the next task.

Some part of Ravi wondered whether or not this qualified as resting, but decided to allow it. He settled onto the bench next to Buckley and leaned over to watch Buckley sort through the pages on the clipboard, listening intently as Buckley explained each form, requisition and checklist he currently carried. In addition to giving Buckley the opportunity to rest, it gave both of them the chance to go over the paperwork in detail.

At about hour nine of their shift, Ravi ran in search of Paramedic Wilson when Buckley didn't seem able to get back up from the bench he'd sat down on to rest. The no-nonsense woman took one look at Buckley and immediately shuttled him off the bunkroom, sending Ravi for the pill bottles labelled with Buckley's name in the kitchen and a couple bottles of water.

Ravi did as told, snickering softly at the way Paramedic Wilson railroaded over Buckley's quiet protests with barely a pause. Bottles handed off to Wilson—who coaxed Buckley into taking two tablets from one bottle and another from a second—Ravi watched only long enough for Wilson to get Buckley horizontal and set in on his boots before he disappeared in search of the Captain's office.

Captain Nash sat at his desk, head bent over files and reports, shouting “Come in!” as Ravi knocked meekly on the doorframe. Looking up, he blinked, visibly surprised to see him standing there.

“Ravi,” he greeted with a frown of confusion. “Everything okay?”

Ravi stepped into the room, shutting the door behind him and coming to stand at parade rest in front of the desk. “Permission to speak freely, sir?”

The man leaned back in his chair, clearly wary of the question as the two watched each other for a long moment. Finally, he sighed and leaned forward on his elbows, asking, “I'm really not going to like this, am I?”

“I don't know, sir,” he replied with a firm shake of his head. “I know Firefighter Buckley's opinion on the matter, and I would be willing to abide by it. Except I cannot remain silent for a moment longer. Lieutenant Han has repeatedly disrespected Firefighter Buckley since the start of shift, and has shown little to no regard for the tasks Buckley has been showing me how to complete. I believe Lieutenant Han to be creating a toxic work environment, and it is not fair to those of us who remain devoted to doing the best job here at the 118.”

“Take a seat, Ravi,” Captain Nash agreed, gesturing towards the seat across from him. The smile on his face looked approving as he insisted, “Let's talk.”

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Bobby had known Chimney for a long time. Honest to God, he still didn't know what happened to warp his friend into someone he no longer recognized.

Ravi's accounting of the insults, snide comments and disrespect he'd heard from the paramedic throughout the day had been thorough, and exacting. It corroborated some of the commentary Bobby had heard himself, as well as some of the negative reactions he'd seen in several of his people if Chimney or Buck happened to be in earshot.

Buck had been adamant that morning - no matter what Bobby heard, Buck wanted him to let it go. His face looked to be healing well; the sinus infection seemed to finally be responding to the antibiotics; and Buck was back at work, the closest thing to a home Buck had ever known. Bobby had promised to let it go . . . and managed to regret that same promise within about ten minutes of starting shift.

Served Bobby right for making his surrogate son a promise he had to have known he couldn't keep.

Thank God for Ravi, who found the courage to defy Buck's desires and do the right thing to make things better for everyone at the 118. Honestly, considering everything that had happened, Bobby

couldn't even claim to be upset about the outcome. Chimney had his chance to make good—to see the error of his ways and go forward with a new outlook. He had elected instead to rely on the fact that Buck didn't care about the jokes and the cruel teasing, and continue on in the same vein.

Unfortunately, a report didn't mean Bobby could just transfer him. Steps needed to be taken, starting with a call to Chief Alonzo about the report from Firefighter Panikkar regarding Lieutenant Han's utter disregard for the chance he'd been given, as well as the continuation of his problematic behavior.

Chief Alonzo signed off immediately on Chimney's suspension, which should have told Bobby about the man's feelings in the first place. At which point Bobby set to looking for other options. A Shift had only two paramedics, and with Chimney's imminent transfer they would quickly be down to one. The 118 would need another paramedic and fast, both on a temporary basis and on a more permanent one. Chief Alonzo promised to get the 118 set up with temporary paramedic help and assign a floater to the station until they could get one in permanently.

Fortunately, Bobby knew exactly who he wanted to fill that spot. Getting Eddie to agree, though, would likely be torture. He would not like being separated from Buck for any kind of long term time frame at all.

Fortunately, Hen had announced her intention to further cut her hours seeing as she had just begun the clinical portion of her schooling. She'd still work the 24 hour shifts, but anything else would need to fall by the wayside as she devoted the majority of her time and attention to school. Ergo, once Buck had healed completely, Eddie's best friend would be joining him at paramedic training. That should make both of them happy.

The only question that remained, however, proved to be the hardest question of all.

With Chimney gone, the 118 would need to replace him or be permanently a man short. Who could they bring to the 118 who would complement the little family they'd formed here, and who would respect Buck more than Chimney had?

Bobby stared at the available files for entirely too long before he hit upon the answer as though he'd become a lightning rod. Instantly he reached for his phone and dialed the 136 - it would take some finagling to convince the captain to give up that particular firefighter, but Bobby could do it.

He had to.

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Hen wanted to throttle her best friend.

She still loved him, she did, but Chimney had been burning bridges all damned day. She just didn't understand why Chimney didn't take responsibility for his own culpability in what happened to Buck and let them all move on.

Okay, so that wasn't true as she did know why Chimney wouldn't take responsibility for it. She just thought they'd gotten past that, but apparently not.

It all circled back to Chimney's jealousy of Buck, once again rearing its ugly head. Four years ago, that jealousy had turned Buck's rescues into Chimney's own, so he could woo Tatiana. Three years ago, that jealousy had warped over Buck's undeniable place in his sister's heart, a place Chimney by no means should be jealous over. Unfortunately, through no fault of her own, everything that had happened as a result of Maddie's PPD once again moved Buck ahead of Chimney in Maddie's



affections. And, more importantly to Chimney, ahead of him in **Jee's** affections.

After his nap, Buck had been installed on the loft couch with Eddie assigned to play guard dog until the end of their shifts in twenty minutes or so. Stationary and missing his niece, Buck had been showing off the pictures he'd taken of Jee to Eddie and Hen ever since. He'd tried to show Chimney, thinking the man might want to see pictures of her, but Chimney had only glared at him and stormed away to a seat at the kitchen bar.

Buck faltered for all of a second, before Eddie demanded evidence of Jee's adorableness and captured Buck's attention once more. Hen had tried to coax her friend into joining them and was summarily rebuffed. Unwilling and unable to deal with his bad attitude, Hen joined the terrible twosome on the couch and leaned in to see Buck's phone. Honestly, the little girl could have been in the dictionary under the word "cutie", with her chubby cheeks wrinkly with the smiles she gave her mother and her uncle in every picture Buck had.

"She is adorable," Eddie insisted. His tone turning teasing and playful, he joked, "Obviously, it's because she looks nothing like you."

"Thank goodness," Buck laughed with a grin. "She's beautiful just the way she is."

Hen chuckled, amused by the relationship between these two idiots once more. "Tell me about the daycare you and Maddie found. It's a 24-hour location, right?"

Buck's mouth opened to answer the question, though he had no chance to speak before Chimney burst up from his chair and demanded, "Daycare? Maddie and I agreed not to have strangers watching her!"

The younger firefighter flinched at the explosiveness of the statement, shoulders hunching a little bit as he insisted, "The Lees are out of the country right now."

Then, his tone firmed as he snapped, "And you couldn't be bothered to answer your damn phone. Maddie made the best choice she could."

"Maddie made her feelings clear about my involvement in her life," Chimney snarled, features twisted furiously. "And in Jee's."

Worried Chimney might be on the verge of saying something he might regret, Hen moved to stand and approach her best friend carefully. "Chim, I'm sure whatever was said, she didn't want to cut you out of Jee's life entirely."

Ignoring Hen completely, Chimney stormed towards Buck with a finger stabbing in his face, bellowing, "This is all your fault! If you had just told me, instead of **lying** to me . . ."

"I didn't lie!" Buck shot back, backpedaling out of Chimney's reach as quickly as he could.

Any further commentary got lost when Bobby bellowed through the loft, "That's enough!" The older man strode into the common area of the loft, with a uniformed and nervous Albert Han following in his wake.

Chimney's eyes narrowed at his brother as he asked, "Albert, what are you doing here?"

"I've been transferred, Chimney," he replied with a frown, body tight with anger as he fell into an easy parade rest at Bobby's left shoulder.

Before Chimney could say anything else about the situation, Bobby cut in, tone sharp and

disappointed. “Pack up your locker, Lieutenant Han, and go. You have been suspended for the next two weeks without pay, effective immediately. Following your suspension, you will report to Station 136 for work. The 118 no longer has the space for your disrespect and snide commentary.”

“What?!” he demanded, eyes going wide. “You’re siding with **him**?”

“Lieutenant Han, the department has given you every opportunity to turn your attitude around and remain with the 118,” Bobby replied, ignoring Chimney’s rather unflattering declaration. “You have elected not to take that opportunity; ergo, the Chief’s decision on the matter is final. You will pack up your locker and you will go. And in two weeks when you return to work, you will report to Captain Cooper at the 136 for duty. He will provide you with your schedule at that time.”

Anything further said was derailed when Buck looked at Eddie and accused, “I asked you to let it go, Eds.”

“I did, Buck!” Eddie replied, eyes wide. “I hated it, but I bit my tongue, just like you asked.”

Hen nodded when Buck looked to her next. “I didn’t say anything, Buckaroo, I promise.”

“I did.”

The entire loft turned to look at Ravi, standing silent and resolute near the loft stairs. Buck immediately sagged, defeated before he even tried to argue. “Ravi . . .” he breathed.

“It’s not right, what he was saying to you,” the younger firefighter insisted. “And I know you just wanted things to go back to normal, sir, but for as long as he continued to treat you without respect or consideration, things at the 118 would be awkward and weird.” He broke down then, features pleading as he all but begged for understanding, “I **had** to do it. For the sake of the entire station, he can’t stay here, sir.”

For a long time, Buck said nothing, just watching Ravi with wide, grateful eyes. At which point, he sighed and smiled, tone teasing as he asked, “It’s Buck, remember?”

Ravi grinned brightly at the statement, tone a quip as he joked, “You’ll probably have to remind me again later.”

Buck laughed. “Yeah, copy that.”

Despite her attention to the interaction between Buck and Ravi, the majority of Hen’s attention had been on the stare-down taking place between Bobby and Chimney. Utterly implacable and unwilling to bend for the other, Hen could feel dread curdling in her stomach, leaving her feeling sick to her stomach. Their little family would never be the same again.

Forever after, Hen would know—it all came to its bloody end here.

## End Notes

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